Transit Across West Virginia

This edition of DigitalCT chronicles our recent journey across West Virginia to meet with transit leaders and officials in the Mountaineer State. Click on the locations on the corresponding map for our full-length feature profiles, as well as our Voices from the Community audio interviews (represented by the microphone icon). Also, be sure to watch Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren’s video note detailing this issue of DigitalCT.

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Voices from the Community

Suzanne Park: West Virginia Public Transit Association

With 18 core member agencies, the West Virginia Public Transit Association is charged with spreading the good word about transit in West Virginia — as well as providing strategic training opportunities. WVPTA Communications Director Suzanne Park talks to CT Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren about the history and emergence of the Association, what it does for its members and the key transit issues the group is pursuing at the state capital. For more information on the West Virginia Public Transit Association, go to wvtransit.com.

Click on the microphone icon to the right to listen to the interview.
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Voices from the Community

Rose Merideth: Wayne Xpress

Wayne Xpress is a rural public transit system in south-western West Virginia that operates 8 routes and non-emergency medical transportation service. Rose Merideth is Executive Director of Wayne Xpress and spoke with CT Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren about the importance of the mobility the system provides, how she sees transit across West Virginia changing and what the future holds for her agency. For more information on Wayne Xpress, go to www.waynexpress.com.

Click on the microphone icon to the right to listen to the interview.
One of the most enjoyable aspects of our annual state tours is experiencing the flavor of each state, absorbing the nuances of local architecture, cuisine and entertainment. He's just a brief snapshot of our experiences in West Virginia.

One of our annual highlights is a minor league sports match of some kind, after hockey and baseball games in Connecticut and California, respectively (Sampson at left, Bogren at right). This time, the West Virginia Power – based in Charleston – was hosting the Hagerstown (Md.) Suns, featuring Washington Nationals’ top prospect Bryce Harper (at bat, below).

Philippi’s historic Baltimore & Ohio Railroad depot (above) is well-preserved and today serves as a museum. Meanwhile, the new Fairmont Connector boulevard (below) – linking downtown Fairmont and I-79 – is seen from the offices of the Fairmont-Marion County Transit Authority.

Before visiting with Paul Davis and Jennifer Woodall at TTA, we stopped off at the nearby Frostop Root Beer drive-in (above), an iconic establishment in Huntington. Below, a well-appointed KTA bus stop stands at the ready outside the agency’s headquarters in Charleston.
The CT Interview: Congressman Nick Rahall

Congressman Nick Rahall has served West Virginia’s third district since first being elected in 1976. Born and raised in southern West Virginia, Rep. Rahall is currently the ranking minority member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and has served on the House Natural Resources Committee for 34 years.

DigitalCT: What is the role of cost-effective and efficient public transit across the state of West Virginia?

Rep. Rahall: “It is common to think of public transit as a necessity in large, urban areas, but public transit is also important in smaller rural communities. Seniors in these communities, for example, often rely on public transit services for day-to-day necessities, like grocery shopping, or visiting the doctor or pharmacy. For many low-income workers, public transit can mean the difference between joblessness and a career.

Throughout West Virginia are examples of how investments in accessible, affordable public transportation also make good fiscal sense because they create jobs, ease congestion, improve access, spur economic development, and, also importantly, they improve the quality of life.”

DigitalCT: During your tenure in Congress, how has that role changed?

Rep. Rahall: “The role of rural transit has become increasingly important over the course of the 34 years I have served on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee – my entire tenure in Congress. As gas prices skyrocket, more residents of rural communities are turning to public transit as one way to lessen the pain at the pump. As West Virginia’s population ages, more seniors are relying on public transportation to remain active, mobile, and independent.”

DigitalCT: As the ranking minority member of the vital House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, where do you see the reauthorization of surface transportation law headed and how will it impact transit providers and passengers in West Virginia?

Rep. Rahall: “Just like many other critical programs, we can expect public transit’s funding to be in jeopardy as Congress looks to tighten its budgetary belt. If the Republican budget that passed the House last month serves as any indication of the realities we face, we will be looking at a surface transportation bill that could shortchange many of the transportation investments that are needed to grow our economy and keep us economically competitive. Transit agencies in West Virginia and across the Nation are already struggling with lower state and local revenues, record high operating costs due to gas prices, and increased ridership. There is no doubt we can do more to be better stewards of the public’s dime, but it is shortsighted to trim the budget at the expense of transportation options for seniors, people with disabilities, commerce, and commuters.”
The CT Interview: Senator Joe Manchin

Senator Joe Manchin was sworn into the U.S. Senate last November, taking the seat of the late Sen. Robert Byrd. Previously, Sen. Manchin was born and raised in Farmington, West Virginia, and was the state’s 34th governor, beginning service in 2005. He currently serves on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee as well as the Senate Special Committee on Aging.

DigitalCT: Last month, CT Magazine staff spent a week traveling around West Virginia visiting transit systems as part of an edition focusing entirely on the state. Tell us about your views on the role and importance of community and public transit in West Virginia?

Sen. Manchin: “Community and public transit play an absolutely invaluable role in West Virginia. We have people in our state who depend on public transportation to live their daily lives, travel to and from work, feed their families, and take care of their health care needs. And, our aging population in West Virginia along with incredibly high fuel prices have only increased our reliance on public transportation.”

DigitalCT: Connecting people to health care is an increasingly important role for community and public transit in West Virginia. How can you help make these vital connections more available and efficient and what do you see as the role of Congress in this issue?

Sen. Manchin: For those who rely on public transportation to get to and from the doctors office, the availability of transit is truly a matter of life or death. We need a strong commitment from lawmakers to ensure that individuals living in rural areas in particular have access to the help and the care they truly need.”

DigitalCT: A key objective for community and public transit — both across West Virginia and the nation — is enhanced connectivity and intermodalism. We saw many excellent examples of such successes on our trip. How do such connections impact the state economically?

Sen. Manchin: I believe that any time you can connect multiple forms of transportation — linking highways, trains and planes — it is very valuable to commerce. If we can diversify the transportation we have available, we will be more accessible and attractive to businesses and residents. And that’s a very good thing for West Virginia.”

DigitalCT: What does the future hold for community and public transit in West Virginia?

Sen. Manchin: “I think we need a strong commitment to public transportation in place to help us balance the uncertainty people in West Virginia are feeling — both as they grow older, and as the cost of fuel continues down its unstable path.”
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Bluefield Area Transit: Coal Country’s Robust Transit Provider

By Rich Sampson

The first visit on tour was with Patrick McKinney and Bluefield Area Transit in Bluefield — which is just about the southernmost point in West Virginia. It was Monday, April 25th, and a bright, clear morning revealed itself as Rich and I took in the beautiful mountain vistas and spring fog that had settled into the valleys as we made our way into Bluefield. We had figured it was best to start our West Virginia journey in Bluefield and to make our way, gradually, north as the week wound on.

Stationed alongside the railroad tracks in Bluefield, W.Va., that shuttle so many carloads of West Virginia’s black diamonds — coal — is the former Norfolk & Western Railroad freight office. In days past, the site — within shouting distance of the Virginia state line — was where railroad managers oversaw the movement of coal trains throughout and beyond the state’s southeastern coalfields, along with local deliveries of products and materials. Today, the same facility still orchestrates mobility on a broad scale, impacting the lives and prosperity of tens of thousands. Instead of the railroad’s strings of coal hopper cars or goods arriving via boxcar, its current occupant — Bluefield Area Transit — moves people.

The Bluefield Coal Rush

Like the genesis of so many transit systems across both West Virginia and the nation, Bluefield’s path to its contemporary mobility network began with the first streetcars in the late 19th century. The city’s streetcar operation was necessitated by a population that grew rapidly in the late 1880s, its coal rush mirroring the search for gold that drew prospectors to California, and its early skyline even drawing boastful comparisons to a nascent Manhattan. And while its population peaked at 25,000 in 1940, its citizens grew accustomed to a vibrant local transit network.

Although private bus companies ultimately replaced the streetcar network, and those same companies ultimately found their business model unprofitable by the 20th century’s midpoint, the community and its leaders still prioritized access to mobility options. It took until 1975 for officials across the region to assume control of the remaining local bus routes and rebrand them the Gateway Regional Transit Authority, but increased support and investment allowed the holdover network to establish a modern identity.

For while the city’s streetcars and later its buses existed to move railroaders and industrial workers to their nearby jobs, the region’s mobility needs had shifted away from employment transportation for the industrial and manufacturing sectors and instead to connections to education, health care and community services. The revitalized operation — renamed Bluefield Area Transit in 1991 — also found a home as a part of the city’s municipal government, allowing it to benefit from not only local investment, but also to share administrative functions like human resources and accounting. That arrangement

Non-emergency medical transportation is a growing component of Bluefield Area Transit’s ridership.
Bluefield Area Transit

allowed the system to focus on what it did best: get people where they needed to go.

“Having the local funding support, as well as the shared administrative functions, allowed this system to gain a solid footing as an important part of the community,” says Patrick McKinney, Manager of Bluefield Area Transit (BAT), who took over managerial duties in 1998.

Beyond Bluefield

Although population and economic trends hardly pointed to Bluefield remaining a bustling small urban area – its current headcount stands at around 11,000, a marked drop from its halcyon days in the early 1900s – local leaders and concerned citizens instead envisioned a more robust path for its transit services, which carried about 65,000 riders a year when the city took over the operation in 1991. They looked to opportunities to broaden their network to serve the larger region beyond the city limits.

Just 10 miles to the northeast lies Princeton, the seat of Mercer County (which also includes Bluefield) and its small city population of more than 7,500. Princeton once hosted a transit operation similar to its southwesterly neighbor, but was unable to sustain it following the demise of its private providers. Seeing an opportunity to not only lend their expertise and resources to Princeton, but also foster improved regional connectivity, BAT reestablished local transit service in Princeton in July 1999 as well as created a new route linking the two communities. Beyond the most important benefit of enhancing mobility in the heart of Mercer County, the arrangement allowed BAT to attract more riders and thereby realize a more efficient operation, but eschewed the need for Princeton to assume the overhead and administrative costs of a separate transit program.

The collaboration between the two communities established momentum for a steadily-expanding portfolio of regional connections. First up was a link between Bluefield and Welch in August 2001, in neighboring McDowell County – the first such service beyond Mercer County’s boundaries. BAT also went to work linking Welch to other McDowell County communities, initially on a route to Gary, followed by a link to the trio of smaller towns of Big Four, Premier and Hemphill. Building on the expanded network was new service to connect Princeton with students attending Concord University in Athens, about eight miles to the northeast of Princeton.

Bolstered by their success in extending the BAT network in Mercer and McDowell counties, the system has cultivated partnerships with transit agencies across the Virginia border. Bluefield’s identically-named counterpart in Virginia established Graham Transit – owing its title to the town’s original name of Graham, Va. – and its main route connects the downtowns of the dual Bluefields 10 times each weekday, and Graham Transit buses pull into BAT’s central transfer location on Princeton Avenue. Likewise, Four County Transit in Tazewell County, Va., created the Four Seasons Connector Intercity Transit service, which operates four times on weekdays between Tazewell and the two Bluefields (another Four Seasons Connector route also reaches Richlands, Va., extending the reach of the interconnected transit network in the region).

“We’ve been pretty aggressive in expanding the reach of BAT, both through service we provide and connections with other systems,” says McKinney, who was a coal miner out of high school and then worked his way up the BAT management chain, starting as an

Patrick McKinney began his career with Bluefield Area Transit as a mechanic. Now he’s its manager.
assistant mechanic. “We’ve opened up a lot of new options for people around here, and made ourselves a more efficient operation in the process.”

Indeed, the expanded vision established for BAT has paid immense dividends. The previous 65,000 annual riders moved on the three-route, Bluefield-focused operation is far outpaced by today’s vibrant, nine-route operation. In 2010, BAT carried more than 175,000 riders, made possible by the work of 25 employees and 28 vehicles. And although the system now has cultivated a regional identity, more than 59,000 annual trips were provided in Bluefield – a number greater than if every Bluefield resident rode BAT five times each year. BAT vehicles also deviate from their routes for up to ¾ of a mile, to serve the needs of people with disabilities. Today, BAT represents the city’s largest municipal service department, providing a key source of employment and activity for the city.

Still More Ahead

“BAT is a source of pride, not only for the city of Bluefield, but the entire region,” says Bluefield Mayor Linda Whalen. “We’re looking forward to what the system can accomplish next.”

Even as BAT has undertaken an ambitious effort to expand its traditional transit routes on a regional basis, it has also identified the community’s needs for more focused service to medical appointments and facilities. Its non-emergency medical transportation program is available to the public during the same hours as its bus routes on weekdays, and will arrange billing for riders eligible for Medicaid and United Mine Workers of America transportation benefits. Currently, the program carries more than 140 passengers each week, and represents one of the most rapidly-growing aspects of BAT’s service.

“Non-emergency medical transportation is an increasingly important part of our work,” says McKinney. “It’s important that people have access to the health care they need to lead productive lives, and we’re glad to be part of that process.”

At the same time, BAT is still considering new destinations to serve in the region, including a connection to Beckley – the largest community in Southern West Virginia, along with Matoaka and Spanishburg (north of Princeton) and Oakvale (east of Bluefield). Further down the road, no public transit service exists in Wyoming County – north of McDowell County – and McKinney has begun to study ways BAT could serve that area.

In addition to new types and locations of service, BAT is moving forward with plans for a new operations facility on the outskirts of Bluefield near I-77 on John Nash Boulevard, named after the Nobel-winning economist of A Beautiful Mind fame, who was born and raised in Bluefield. The new facility is a former trucking company with plenty of room to host BAT’s expanding operations, and would keep the transit system in a historically transportation-related location (before the freight depot, BAT was still located in the city’s old streetcar barns). Investment is likely available through federal, state and local sources – including a State of Good Repair grant obtained by the West Virginia Division on Public Transit – but environmental and historic approvals must be finalized before the property can be purchased.

Paths to Success

No matter where Bluefield Area Transit calls its physical home, or the types of services it provides, the system has cultivated a long-standing presence for mobility in Southern West Virginia. It has achieved success by utilizing the proven techniques that make many great transit operations vibrant: responsiveness to the needs of their community, partnerships throughout
regions and across boundaries, and a spirit of professionalism that cements mobility as an asset the community cannot afford to go without. For Patrick McKinney, it’s a vision he’s observed at every stage of his ascent through the organization, from mechanic to manager.

“We’ve been at this a while, and people have taken notice as to what an important service we provide,” says McKinney. “It’s a rewarding way to spend your day, and I know we make a difference every day.”

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Urban Transit – West Virginia Style

By Scott Bogren

The Kanawha Valley Regional Transportation Authority’s headquarters, which we visited on the afternoon of Monday, April 25th, was easy to spot on the city streets of Charleston due to the number of vehicles, bus stops and overall activity hub that the facility represents in this part of town. Doug Hartley, the system’s Assistant General Manager met with us as General Manager Dennis Dawson was unavailable that day. That Hartley could speak so fluently not only about KRT, but about all of the systems we intended to visit that week spoke volumes about the transit partnership that has been forged across West Virginia.

West Virginia’s state capital of Charleston is a city of just over 50,000 people in the state’s most populous county. Situated alongside the Kanawha (pronounced Ka-Naw) River in a valley, the city spreads out lengthwise in an east-west orientation with the beautiful gold-domed capitol building at its eastern end. Charleston is, not surprisingly, home to the state’s largest public transit operation — the Kanawha Valley Regional Transportation Authority (KRT).

Transit Happens Here

“Almost half of all transit trips in West Virginia happen here,” says KRT Assistant General Manager Doug Hartley. Indeed, with 21 fixed routes, a burgeoning intercity route between Charleston and Huntington, an expansive operation for people with disabilities and service throughout Kanawha County and also in parts of Fayette and Putnam Counties, KRT is an urban transit operation with a service area population of 195,000. The system had 2.5 million riders in 2010, up 5 percent from the previous year.

KRT runs its service from 4:20 a.m. to 12:30 a.m., seven days a week — with some variations depending on the route. Fares are zone based with a basic fare of $1 and cannot exceed $2.50. Reduced fares of 50-cents are available for seniors and paratransit service fares are exactly double that of the fixed-route.

“Fully 88 percent of the population in our service area lives within three-quarters of a mile of a KRT route,” says Hartley, acknowledging the expanse of the system in the region. The towns of South Charleston, Nitro, St. Albans and Dunbar are key parts of the system’s regional service, as is the intercity connection to Huntington — 52 miles to the west of Charleston.

The basic service mode for Charleston is one that makes imminent sense in West Virginia. “Basically,” says Hartley, “we use smaller body-on-chassis style buses to go up-and-down the hills and deliver passengers to our main routes.” KRT operates the Laidley Street Transit Mall in the city’s center as a hub and transfer point and that highlights the operator’s commitment to mixed-use development.

Connectivity is a key objective at KRT, and not just to the many businesses and other destinations it serves along its routes, but also to other forms of transportation. In fact,
the system currently connects with both Greyhound and Amtrak, as well as with Tri-State Transit Authority (TTA) in Huntington and Tri-River Transit in rural Lincoln County southwest of Charleston.

Among KRT’s nearly 60-vehicle fleet are five trolley buses that it operates on a five-mile loop serving the state capitol and campus as well as major retail areas.

KRT: Locally Supported

KRT’s brick headquarters is located on the west side of Charleston on Fourth Street and is readily recognizable as a transit facility for both its unique clock tower on one end and the collection of various-sized buses behind it. From the buses coming and going to driver activities to riders boarding buses at street-side shelters, the facility is a hub of activity that speaks to KRT’s importance to the Charleston region.

Another clear indication of the system’s local significance is its local support, which takes the form of a property tax levy which must be renewed every four years and which passed at a more than 80 percent approval rate in May 2010.

“The levy, because it’s critical to our system, gives us the chance to engage our community and talk to them about the importance of transit,” says Hartley.

And the message that KRT officials share with voters is a simple one. Hartley holds up a hand and counts with his fingers as he says: “There’s two main reasons why people get on our buses. One is to make money and the other is to spend money.”

A Challenging Time

Employment commutes are KRT’s top trip purpose and the system regularly gauges its profile, or most common passenger, as a 21-year-old female, going to work, riding the bus more than four times a week. Another key passenger group for KRT are seniors, who constitute 13 percent of the system’s ridership.

Even with commuting being such a primary purpose for KRT, the system faces steep challenges, not the least of which is readily available, inexpensive parking downtown Charleston as well as in-and-around the capitol grounds and office buildings on the capitol campus.

“People can usually find all-day parking here for $1.75 and there’s really not any congestion in Charleston,” says Hartley. “So we don’t have those issues (parking costs and traffic) driving people to our buses.” He does acknowledge, however, that gas prices absolutely increase ridership and with those prices flirting with $4 per gallon throughout West Virginia, the system had enjoyed steady ridership increases in the past few months when compared to the same months in 2010.

As has been the case with many similarly sized transit systems across the country, KRT is exploring paring some of its service — all in the name of efficiency.

“These are tough financial times for many people here in Charleston,” says Hartley. “We’re looking at reallocating some of our resources to ensure we’re being as cost-effective with the taxpayers’ investment.”

Projecting a Positive Image for Transit

Being the largest transit system in the state and with its location in the state capital, KRT leadership understands how important its image is, as well as its leadership role state-wide. That vital leadership role manifests itself in numerous ways, from projecting a positive image for transit in the state capital, to helping other West Virginia transit systems.

KRT Assistant General Manager Doug Hartley understands the economic benefits of reliable transit service.
The Competitive Edge:
Making Community and Public Transit the Best Alternative for Medical Transportation

Today there is never-before-seen complexity in the non-emergency medical transportation field. Limited funding combined with growing patient loads has states seeking intermediaries that can control costs through competition. Community and public transportation providers must become efficient, safe, cost-effective and accountable to maintain these important medical transportation services. The Community Transportation Association, in response to requests from its members, is introducing a new initiative this fall — the Competitive Edge — which will give community and public transit providers the tools, resources and benefits they need to make them central players in this new medical transportation environment. Here’s what the Competitive Edge encompasses:

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   - CTAA staff: Our professional staff are always available to offer analysis and insight
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Please go to [www.ctaa.org/competitiveedge](http://www.ctaa.org/competitiveedge) to learn how you can bring the Competitive Edge to your state. As always, CTAA training staff are available to help tailor this new program to your precise needs. Please call Charles Dickson at 202.247.8356 or email dickson@ctaa.org for all the details on this unique opportunity!
West Virginia’s Public Transit Division

“To Foster, Assist and Promote...”

By Scott Bogren

It took us a bit to find a place to park on the Capital grounds on the morning of Tuesday, April 26 as we visited with Susan O’Connell and the West Virginia DOT’s Public Transit Division. But once we did (and for a mere $1.50!), we were able to make our way to Public Transit Division’s headquarters quickly, stopping only to snap some shots of the gold-domed Capitol. O’Connell and her colleague, Cindy Fish, patiently waded through all of our questions and even invited the West Virginia DOT’s Director of Communications, Brent Walker, to join us. The role of these dedicated folks in building transit across West Virginia became apparent right away.

The gleaming gold dome of the West Virginia State Capitol commands the eastern side of Charleston, looking down on the flowing Kanawha and surrounded by a series of 1960s-era government buildings. It’s a beautiful campus-like setting that is home to, among many others, the West Virginia Department of Transportation’s Public Transit Division.

And there, from a series of offices on the 9th floor of Building 5, behind a wood door festooned with a public transit license plate, West Virginia’s public transit guiding hand, Susan O’Connell, supporting the 18 transit providers offering service in 32 of the state’s 55 counties. The only director that the Public Transit Division has known since its creation in 1991, O’Connell’s presence was keenly felt at every stop CT Magazine staff made on its West Virginia trip. Transit managers, when speaking about their system’s inception, noted how Susan was instrumental, or how she helped bring together the right partners to make the funding work, or that she advised them to explore non-emergency medical transportation opportunities. Never once did they stop to tell me exactly who was this Susan to whom they alluded — they knew that I knew. In the West Virginia community and public transit world, everyone knows Susan O’Connell.

“Susan O’Connell is unique in her role,” says noted community and public transportation trainer Mike Noel of Lazaro-Noel, who has worked directly with the state’s transit systems and the DOT. “She is a rare combination of tough administrator who demands accountability and return on investment by West Virginia transit systems, yet in so many ways is a friend and cheerleader for the same transit systems.”

O’Connell can rattle off the pertinent facts about transit and transit systems across her beloved West Virginia like a proud parent.

The depth and breadth of O’Connell’s stewardship of public transit across West Virginia...
is extraordinary. From vehicle purchases to service changes, tax levy votes to land acquisitions for new facilities, nothing happens in public transit without her involvement and guidance.

At the West Virginia Public Transit Association's annual meeting, O'Connell and her colleagues in the Public Transit Division – notably, Cindy Fish – present awards to the systems across the state, honoring outstanding safety, service and commitment. It was common to see these awards prominently displayed at transit system headquarters statewide.

With more than three decades of public transit leadership in West Virginia, O'Connell is not the least bit weary and remains a tireless advocate to keep community and public transit prospering in a largely rural state. Just the opposite, O'Connell thrives on the challenge and she and her staff are always looking for new ways to make transit better.

From the beginning – and far before it became a common vision – she believed in regionalism for public transit, because it was a cost-savings and for its efficiency.

“We don't need 55 transit agencies for 55 counties here in West Virginia,” O'Connell says. “It's much more efficient to have multi-county operators.”

She has also ensured that West Virginia community and public transit operators — both individually and as a group — have access to the very latest and most innovative training and certification programs. From safety and coordination plans to non-emergency medical transportation plans, the West Virginia DOT Public Transit Division believes in providing a full-range of training to its grantees.

“West Virginia is a leader in so many areas, including facilities, technology, safety, marketing and training,” says Mike Noel.

Looking to the Future

As was the case with many of the public transit leaders CT Magazine met with across West Virginia, O'Connell's assessment of the future for the field was one of both caution and concern. Not surprisingly, transit investment was atop her list.

“I'm hopeful that the onset of $4-a-gallon gas (indeed, West Virginia had gone over that figure, statewide — ed) might open up some of our state legislators to the idea that investing more in public transit is a good thing,” says O'Connell.

Another national news item that had clear and dramatic reverberations around West Virginia was last year's loss of Senator Robert Byrd after a more than 50-year run in Washington, D.C. The late Senator's impact on surface transportation in West Virginia is unmistakable as roads, highways and bridges throughout the state bear his name, as do many placards at public transit facilities.

“In so many ways, the loss of Senator Byrd is deeply felt by all of us,” says O'Connell.

Even with the seeming gathering storm clouds, O'Connell retains an optimistic perspective on the future for transit across West Virginia. Her optimism is clearly rooted in her faith in the systems, their leaders and their innovation.

“You know what, it's never been easy to provide transit in this state,” says O'Connell. “Just look at our geography! But people have always needed a way to get there and the transit systems have always found a way to make the trip happen.”

O'Connell's faith is well founded. From the types of vehicles the systems drive to the software used to schedule trips to the facilities out of which the agencies operate, she has had a guiding role in the development and suc-
cess of community and public transit in West Virginia. Her’s is a strong influence, one that emerges from a unique combination of vision, patience and, when needed, firm direction.

“Even after three decades, Susan still brings enthusiasm and passion into everything she and the Division of Public Transit do,” says Noel. “When you visit a transit system in West Virginia you see Susan’s contribution in awards proudly hanging on walls, state of the art equipment and professionally trained employees. She has impacted virtually every aspect of public transit in her state.”

She sums up her role thusly: “We (the West Virginia DOT’s Public Transit Division) are here to foster, assist and promote public transit.” CT

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We got our first taste of rain and storms on the hour drive from Charleston to Huntington on the afternoon of Tuesday, April 26. Interestingly, these two small cities were recently agglomerated by the 2010 Census into a single large urbanized area. And though development along I-64 was greater than we anticipated, it still struck us both as absurd that in the hour drive we’d never left a large-urban area. With Marshall University, a still-active steel mill and a vibrant downtown, Huntington looked lively in spite of the rainy weather. We’d soon learn more with Paul Davis as our tour guide.

Huntington occupies the far western part of West Virginia at the precise point where the state comes in contact with both Ohio and Kentucky. The Tri-State Transit Authority (TTA) has served this region since its formation in 1972 — and public transit has served the region, in various forms, since 1888.

Transportation is, in fact, the very reason for Huntington’s founding. The city was named in 1870 for Collis P. Huntington — one of the most iconic names in American railroading history and a famed member of the Southern Pacific’s Big Four. Mr. Huntington founded the city as the western terminus of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, no doubt for its position on the Ohio River and the nearby fertile coal fields of southern West Virginia.

Today, transportation continues to shape the development of Huntington — though the primary role of the river and freight has diminished. In many ways, it’s public transit and Huntington’s TTA that are now shaping the city’s future and General Manager Paul
E. Davis – a native Huntingtonian – wouldn’t have it any other way. “Our system’s reputation is one that is clean, efficient and takes cares of its customers,” says Davis.

Crisis = Opportunity

Ironically, some of the key moments in the evolution of public transit in Huntington have been the scarce periods where its very existence has been most threatened. The first of these took place as the privately operated Ohio Valley Bus Service began to fail in the early 1970s and a 10-month labor dispute stranded passengers and convinced officials from both Cabell County and Huntington to take over the bus system as a public service. In 1972 the TTA was formed and has been serving the tri-state region ever since.

“The outcry when all transit service disappeared was enough to convince local elected officials, particularly because some of it came from the business community,” says Davis.

The next threat to transit in Huntington occurred in 1981 when the County withdrew financing for the system leaving only the city. Transit leadership turned the crisis into opportunity by winning the chance to go out to local citizens in a levy referendum, which was passed, affirming the recognized importance of transit in Huntington.

“And they’ve been passing our levy ever since 1982,” says Davis. “Today, we try to talk to every organization possible about TTA and its role in the community — pretty much anyone who’ll listen.”

The city-county property tax levy is approved every five years, most recently in May of 2010 with a close to 70 percent approval.

About TTA

Last year, TTA provided 800,000 rides along its 15 fixed routes and attendant paratransit service. Not surprisingly, Davis reports that ridership is already trending up in 2011 — largely due to the increase in gas prices.

The basic TTA bus fare is $1.00 and the system operates with three fare zones. Passengers travelling into or out of the Huntington city limits incur an additional charge of 25¢. There is also an additional charge of 25¢ between the towns of Milton and Culloden. In Ohio, there is an additional charge of 25¢ for certain services to-and-from Ironton or Huntington.

In 2008, faced with declining local tax revenues and an overall downturning economy, TTA leaders raised fares by a quarter.

“We really had two choices,” recalls Davis. “We could have either raised fares or cut service. We asked our customers and partners in the region and overwhelmingly they said do not cut service.”

Diversifying

Recently, TTA has moved in the direction of non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT) and its potential to help diversify its funding base. To lead this important agency effort, Davis brought aboard Jennifer Woodall. Her role is to build the NEMT service and work directly with health care providers of all types and sizes in the tri-state region.

“We see huge growth potential in NEMT,” says Woodall. “And it allows us to work with some non-traditional transit supporters like hospitals, veterans facilities and clinics.”
The NEMT service that TTA has launched now provides trips to more than 200 riders a month, people for whom transit is a connection to a better life.

“The best thing about NEMT is that it diversifies our funding base, and it also helps fortify the levy by adding additional and important allies to the importance of TTA,” says Davis. (Davis will be a participant in the Medicaid Crisis Session at the Community Transportation EXPO on June 8 — ed.)

**Building for the Future**

TTA's headquarters is right along the Ohio River on the western edge of town in a building it first occupied in 1974 — though the system has subsequently added a second story. Offering vehicle storage, a driver break room and administrative, operations and maintenance space, the facility has been able to evolve alongside its occupant.

Yet the headquarters facility is just one of TTA’s signature footprints in Huntington. Downtown are both Pullman Square and the combined Tri-State Transit Authority Center-Greyhound Bus Terminal.

Pullman Square is a four-square block area in the heart of downtown Huntington that has been revitalized largely around the auspices of an intermodal transit hub and retail area. Designed around the theme of an old-time small town, Pullman Square stands today on ground once known locally as the Superblock, that took nearly 30 years to be fully developed. Numerous development concepts came and went. Finally, in 1998, the current mixed retail plan emerged, with TTA playing a large role. Construction began in July of 2004 and the site was completed in a year. Today, Pullman Square offers a wide variety of retail and restaurant options, as well as a TTA ticket office and transfer bus center.

“Pullman Square helped revitalize downtown Huntington and we’re proud that TTA had an important role in its development,” says Davis. “We like to call the bus shelter and stop out front the nicest bus stop in all of West Virginia.”

It may be the nicest stop in all of West Virginia transit, but the next stop on our tour of TTA facilities — the combined Tri-State Transit Authority Center-Greyhound Bus Terminal — is likely one of the state’s most historic. Originally built in 1953, this TTA transfer point and Greyhound terminal is readily identifiable as a bus station as soon as it comes into view. From its rounded brick façade and block glass at street front to the orderly bus stalls out back, the Greyhound Station is an elegant timepiece as well as a busy, working transit facility.

“Much of the interior was remodeled in 1994,” says Davis. “We made the waiting areas more comfortable and turned the old restaurant into a conference room.”
**A Company Man**

During a tour of the TTA headquarters building, Davis stops and points to a framed black and white photo on a hallway wall of a historic streetcar photo from the Ohio Valley Electric Railway Company. The numeral “3” is barely visible on the car.

“It’s still the #3 on Third Avenue,” he says, smiling. The story of his career in transit is an unusual one.

“I was going to be a welder,” he says. Yet he began his working life as the manager with Heck’s Department Store. That chain’s demise and a desire to return home to Huntington found him competing with two truck drivers for a single bus driving position with the transit agency.

“I outdrove the truck drivers and got the job,” says Davis. “I drove at the system for just a year and loved every minute of it.”

Next, he worked four years as a dispatcher before becoming an operations assistant and then assistant to the general manager. His predecessor as general manager, Vickie Shaffer, mentored Davis until her retirement.

“Vickie made sure TTA had a clear succession plan because she cared so much about her employees and our customers and I can’t tell you how much I learned from her,” says Davis.

**Moving Forward**

In many ways, a system like TTA could easily rest on its success. It enjoys excellent ridership and local financial support; its local image is enhanced by the beautiful facilities from which it operates; and the system has evolved from a long lineage of transit service in the Huntington area. Yet Davis and his team continue to reach for more.

“We see the regional nature of our service expanding as Huntington and the surrounding areas become increasingly dependent upon each other for employment, health care, education and more,” says Davis.

**Community Transportation and Commuter Vanpooling**

A new partnership with VPSI Inc., the nation’s largest provider of public vanpool services, affords CTAA members and their constituents a new option for the expansion of cost-effective commuter services.

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Whenever we mentioned Philippi, people in West Virginia would immediately tell us about the covered bridge. On Wednesday, April 27 on a crisp morning, we walked and then drove the covered bridge before heading into town to meet with officials from Here and There Transit. The aptly named Here and There Transit is rural transit at its finest and our ride along one of their vehicles revealed some essential truths about such operations no matter where in the country they serve. Rural transit is about people helping their neighbors, and Here and There Transit reminded us what these values look like.

The Philippi Covered Bridge spans 285 feet over the Tygart River, uniting the banks of its namesake city since 1852. As one of West Virginia’s most recognizable icons, the wooden structure designed by native Mountaineer Lemuel Chenoweth from planks of local yellow poplar represents the longstanding and authentic connections fostered between communities, people and destinations. And although the bridge – the same one feuded over during the Civil War’s first land battle here on June 3, 1861 – was almost destroyed by an accidental fire in 1989, its subsequent rebuilding in 1991 reflects the rugged endurance of this largely rural region.

The same spirit of connectivity and endurance that defines the Covered Bridge inhabits the work of Here & There Transit, Barbour County’s rural public transportation system. Offering a range of mobility options throughout – and beyond – Barbour County, Here & There Transit is nothing less than an urgently-needed facet of life for so many who live and work here.

Riding Along with Here & There

It’s a warm, sunny weekday morning in the Tygart River Valley, and we’re riding along in a van piloted by Here & There driver Larry...
Kelley, enroute from Philippi’s quaint town center to pick-up a few area riders. Kelley explains that although he makes a fine living raising cattle on his farm on the outskirts of Philippi (pronounced Fill-Uh-Pea), he signed up with Here & There nearly two years ago to interact more with others in the community. His ease in those sorts of interactions is demonstrable as we head to the local supermarket to pick-up Eugene, who’s waiting at the Here & There bus stop stationed steps from the grocery store’s front door. Kelley reminds Eugene to buckle up before pulling out from the parking lot, and knows the route to Eugene’s home up on Little Hacker Holler by heart, based on his repeated trips there.

As public transportation, trips like Eugene’s to and from the supermarket are available to everyone, even though they’re provided as the type of demand-response service that’s usually limited to eligible participants only elsewhere, and is just $2 each way (with another $1 needed for additional stops). The system’s prioritization of demand-response trips reflects the rural reality of the region. That combination of access and affordability is what draws passengers like Eugene several times every week.

“I wouldn’t know what we’d do without it,” says Nancy. “It helps so much to have good people driving these vans and taking us where we need to go.”

**Making Connections Possible**

Stories like those of Eugene or Jacob and Nancy mark the heart of Here & There’s work, which began in July 2000 through the leadership of the area’s senior program, the Barbour County Senior Center and its Executive Director, Brenda Wilmoth. Although the Senior Center had provided transportation for older persons in Barbour County for decades – largely supported by investment through the state’s Legislative Initiative for Elderly Funding, which directs lottery revenues to senior programs – it became increasingly apparent to Wilmoth and other local leaders that people of all ages needed improved transportation options. Here & There combines a small contribution from the city of Philippi – which today hosts a population of more than 2,800, with another 12,000 residing throughout Barbour County – with federal investment. That investment – through the Federal Transit Administration’s Section 5311 program – was channeled through the state of West Virginia Department of Transportation’s Division of...
Public Transit, and allowed the establishment of Here & There Transit. The arrangement allowed the organization with the experience in providing mobility options to take the lead in providing enhanced service.

“We broadened our focus from only serving seniors to the entire community, with the help of our local leaders and state and federal support,” says Wilmoth. “Since we were the agency already providing transportation in the area, our leaders looked to us to expand the system.”

The program grew incrementally, first by opening up its existing demand-response services for seniors to the larger population for trips within Barbour County. Then came options to reach shopping centers and medical appointments outside of Barbour County, linking the region with an expanded range of opportunities elsewhere in the state. More recently, Here & There added its first deviated fixed-route serve, the Blue & Gray Loop – its branding a nod to the region’s Civil War heritage. The route serves downtown Philippi, key destinations such as the supermarket and Broaddus Hospital, as well as several apartment buildings. The Loop operates every hour between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. on weekdays.

As the set of options offered by Here & There has grown, naturally, too, has its ridership. From an initial 11,000 annual riders in July 2000, today more than 24,000 passengers utilize the system each year, with 11 vans each travelling an average of 1,300 miles every weekday. Yet, despite the operation’s evolving direction, its core vision has remained the same: providing access to mobility for anyone in need.

“We work to ensure everyone can get where they need to go,” says John Berger, Here & There’s Operations Manager, who came to the agency for more than three years ago – first as a part-time driver – after retiring as a teacher. “These vans are essential to so many people, and we do everything we can to respond to their needs.”

Impacting Lives

The growing nature of Here & There’s business over the past decade has positioned the service well to respond to the shifting dynamics of mobility needs. Demand for non-emergency medical transportation has fueled much of the system’s expansion, and Wilmoth and her colleagues expect that demand to only rise in coming years. Health care trends in rural areas suggest the utilization of more outpatient care and the centralization of services at regional medical centers – the kind requiring longer and more frequent trips outside of Barbour County, to places like Morgantown and Charleston. But due to the central approach to mobility infused throughout Here & There’s evolution, it’s a challenge the organization awaits with vigor.

“What we do impacts people’s lives,” says Wilmoth. “You can see a change in attitudes when people work together, and know that we’re working to make their lives better.”

Here & There Director Brenda Wilmoth(above) and Operations Manager John Berger have overseen the system’s rapid growth in recent years.
We found our trip taking us up into north-central West Virginia and into Fairmont to visit with George Levitsky and the Fairmont-Marion Transit Authority on the afternoon of Wednesday, April 27. We took the backroads into Fairmont from Philippi rather than the more direct route along I-79, which again afforded us the opportunity to enjoy the splendid views of this gorgeous state. Fairmont immediately struck us a small city valiantly attempting to reinvent itself after several decades of decline. The Fairmont Marion Transit Authority will clearly have an important role in the city’s and the county’s transformation.

At the curving intersection of Quincy and Adams Streets in downtown Fairmont, West Virginia once stood the home of Francis Harrison Pierpont. As the Governor of the Union-controlled portions of Virginia that eventually separated to form the Mountaineer State, Pierpont is often referred to as the father of West Virginia. Today on those same grounds – atop the hilly bluffs overlooking the headwaters of the Monongahela River that flows north to Morgantown and then Pittsburgh – are the facilities home to the Fairmont-Marion County Transit Authority (FMCTA).

In the same manner that Pierpont is often credited with shaping the development of his native state, FMCTA has helped guide the contemporary identity of Fairmont and the surrounding region. Bridging the gap between both urban and rural transit through a range of services and connections, the system now boasts of climbing ridership, growing links to health care facilities and an expanded role in enhancing the region’s vitality.

Restoring Access

The arch of Fairmont’s growth from a riverside outpost between Morgantown
Fairmont-Marion County Transit and Clarksburg to a small urban area corresponds with the trajectory of similarly sized communities elsewhere. From its establishment in the 1820s with just a couple hundred residents, its population skyrocketed in the century's last decade, with a nearly unbelievable 450 percent explosion to more than 5,500 between 1890 and 1900. Drawn by a mix of mining interests, industry and manufacturing – made possible by access to the Monongahela – population topped out at nearly 30,000 in 1950 and today stands at 19,000 largely due to the retreat of the nation’s manufacturing and industrial sectors over the past half-century.

On a parallel track was the development of transit options in Fairmont. Streetcars installed by private companies first blanketed the city, and were converted to bus operation by the 1950s. Over the next two decades, these private bus routes became unprofitable and were abandoned in late 1971. Over the next 17 months, the city of Fairmont and Marion County worked together to restore transit service, and FMCTA buses were rolling on June 7, 1973. Both governments supplied the initial investment necessary to launch the system, hence the combined name.

FMCTA began operations with seven routes serving Fairmont, with another five extending beyond the city’s boundaries into Marion County, much of it rural territory. The same cohort of workers, shoppers and students at Fairmont State University and Pierpont Community & Technical College – where today’s enrollment stands at more than 7,300 – that utilized the private streetcars and buses returned to take advantage of the restored service. Restoring transit service in the region marked a crucial decision for local officials and community leaders.

“It was important for us to bring back our bus service,” says Raymond Morgan, the longtime President of the agency’s Board of Directors. “People around here really needed a way to get to work, to the doctor or school, and that’s why we were able to come together to set-up the system.”

A Little City, A Little Country

Although Fairmont has a well-defined downtown district and falls squarely into the category of a small-urban area, Marion County is a largely rural region. Accordingly, FMCTCA has always existed as a hybrid between rural and urban transit. Several routes are focused on service within Fairmont, offering frequent service and many stops. But those stretching out through the county – to communities like Farmington, Mannington, Metz and Worthington – are longer runs making a handful of stops every hour or two. Today, the system operates 16 routes on weekdays, with another five continuing on Saturdays, all of which congregate at the Court House in Fairmont to facilitate transfers. FMCTCA also offers demand response service for those who cannot access the fixed-route network.

The availability of access in smaller communities and rural areas of the county is a fundamental aspect for the region’s vitality. For residents living in these outlying areas, a way to reach employment locations, medical care, educational programs and social services can be a profound element in maintaining their quality of life. Many such opportunities in Marion County are centralized in Fairmont, making a reliable and efficient means of mobility all the more essential. And, increasingly, as health care options and intercity travel become even more regionalized, new connections beyond Fairmont have only grown in importance.

To that end, the system expanded beyond
the boundaries of Marion County in the late 1980s to serve downtown Morgantown, along with Ruby Memorial and West Virginia University hospitals. The route operates four times each weekday on an hour and 25 minute trip, there and back, offering transfer’s to the Mountain Line Transit Authority – Morgantown’s transit system (see page 36 for more – ed). Additionally, in the mid-1990s, the system launched a new service to connect with Clarksburg in neighboring Harrison County. FMCTA’s three daily roundtrips to Clarksburg not only link with the Central West Virginia Transit Authority (Centra) in the city’s downtown, but also directly serve the VA Medical Center there. More recently, the agency has worked with Mountain Line to integrate its routes with Mountain Line’s Grey Line regional bus service, connecting Fairmont, Clarksburg and Morgantown with downtown Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh International Airport.

“We operate a pretty unique and expansive system,” says George Levitsky, CCTM, the agency’s General Manager since 2003, who was recognized as the Community Transportation Manager of the Year at EXPO 2009 in Providence, R.I. “We’re a mix of a traditional city bus system and a long-distance rural program. But it’s what people around here need to live their lives.”

Whatever It Takes

As much as it might be apparent how the FMCTA’s blend of small urban and rural service works together to serve the region, less obvious – but just as crucial – is the system’s exhaustive work to become an active and relied-upon presence in the larger community. It begins with the operation’s affordability – fares range from just $.50 in the Fairmont city limits to only $2 for the long-distance runs to Clarksburg and Morgantown – and haven’t been raised in more than a decade. And although routes have been realigned over the years, large-scale cutbacks in service have also been avoided. For an area with gradually lower population counts and modest incomes, the system’s resilience in the face of budget challenges and rising fuel costs is much needed.

“We’ve worked hard to keep fares and service where they’ve always been,” says Levitsky. “We need to be one aspect of our community people can count on from year to year.”

That spirit of dependability isn’t limited to just fares and schedules. It’s an overall mindset that spans everything from the FMCTA’s trolley bus at the front of local parades to responding to riders whose trips require an extra measure of devotion. FMCTA drivers have shoveled out snowbound passengers and returned for a pick-up after a busy day at the doctor’s office led to a missed trip. Levitsky has even been known to arrange housing for his drivers looking for new accommodations. Another story has Levitsky and his colleagues racing down the street to respond to a fire threatening neighboring structures. They were the first ones on the scene.

That ethos that defines the agency also hasn’t gone unnoticed by key leaders in the community.

“The FMCTA provides superior service for our residents,” says Andy Kniceley, Publisher of the Times West Virginian, Fairmont’s local newspaper, who once observed FMCTA Maintenance Director Eric Southern rescuing one of his paper supply trucks stuck on a snowbank. “They’re a good community partner and good stewards of community investment.”
“We’re so thankful to have an asset like the FMCTA,” agrees Tiffany Samuels, Executive Director of the United Way of Marion County. “They’re always here to help the people who need it most, and do it so professionally.”

As evidence of how embedded the system’s role in the community has become, when the West Virginia Department of Transportation recently constructed a new boulevard connecting downtown Fairmont to Interstate 79 – the Fairmont Connector – the agency automatically installed high-quality bus stops and bus bays on every block, anticipating FMCTA’s service along the stretch. Few transit systems find highway engineers naturally considering local transit needs without asking. Levitsky credits that presence to strong guidance and support from the West Virginia Department of Transportation’s Public Transit Division, as well as dedicated leaders and officials in Fairmont and Marion County who’ve backed the system for more than three decades.

Not That Uncommon

Based on its hybrid urban-rural identity, the FMCTA might seem distinct among transit providers. But with a closer look, the same values and habits that have made the system successful here are the same that produce results elsewhere: efficient and responsive service; strong partnerships and regional connections; and a fundamental desire to reflect the best a community has to offer.

“We strive to be a community-minded transit authority,” says Levitsky. “I know that’s something that’s common among all our transit systems in West Virginia, and we’re honored to be a part of that.”

CT Fast Mail

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Mountain Line Transit Authority: Making Connections in Real-Time

By Rich Sampson

On Thursday morning, April 28, we began the final day of our tour in Morgantown — one of the fastest growing (both in terms of population and economy) regions in West Virginia. Mountain Line Transit Authority is an outstanding example of a fully formed, multi-modal transit operation that meets a multitude of needs and offers riders seamless connections. Manager David Bruffy spent the morning with us, riding along on vehicles, highlighting the system’s numerous accomplishments and pointing to what he hopes he and his colleagues can achieve tomorrow.

On a recent weekday afternoon, Kirk Street — in the south end of downtown Morgantown, West Virginia, near the valley carved out by Deckers Creek — was blocked by crews doing utility work. The driver on the Gold Line route, a part of the network of Morgantown’s Mountain Line Transit Authority, radioed dispatch informing them his and future runs should take nearby Chestnut and Foundry streets to avoid the backup. Minutes later, the thumbs-up icon on the system’s Facebook status update lit up, indicating to numerous Gold Line riders — many of them students at West Virginia University — had already received the service change note and appreciated the heads-up. At the same time, re-Tweets of the same message sent via Twitter percolated across the region, as Mountain Line’s now routine communications network sprung into action.

Communications tools like aggressive use of Facebook and Twitter are just two of the resources the agency uses to provide and

Mountain Line's route network is strongly supported by students at West Virginia University — rides are free with a WVU ID — but also open to the general public in Morgantown and Monongalia County.
Mountain Line Transit Authority

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enhance mobility in this university-focused region. Its service network includes a full-
fledged intercity bus route linking two states, connections to the nation’s only Personal
Rapid Transit (PRT) system and a wide-ranging service expansion vision that may further
cement Mountain Line’s role in shaping the region’s future.

**Shaping Transit in a University Community**

Although settlers first arrived on the banks of the Monongahela River in the 1770s to
form today’s Morgantown, and the city was incorporated by 1810 in what was then still
part of Virginia, the region found its true identity when the state’s namesake academic
institution was established in 1867 as one of the nation’s early land-grant universities. For
while coal mines and manufacturing plants drew a sizable set of workers and their families,
no other enterprise could match the level of activity and permanence as West Virginia
University (WVU), with its faculty, staff and students attracting tens of thousands to
Morgantown by the early 1900s. Today, WVU registers more than 29,000 students each
year, with academic and administrative staffs approaching 10,000 workers and the city itself
hosting a population of more than 30,000.

And yet, despite its importance to the region’s vibrancy, until recently, mobility options between the community and WVU were largely separate. Until 1996, Morgantown operated its own transit service, while the surrounding Monongalia County and

WVU did the same (much of the university’s transportation service was focused around its unique PRT system linking its historic downtown campus with its newer outlying facilities – ed. That year, an effort led by the area’s Chamber of Commerce to investigate the efficiency of the region’s various public service and programs built momentum for a united transit system between Morgantown and Monongalia County.

The Mountain Line Transit Authority was subsequently created out of the initiative, yielding a transit network moving more than 200,000 annual riders. And while the merged system improved efficiency and provided better service for existing passengers, transit officials knew the revitalized operation was only the beginning of a new approach to mobility in the region.

“We recognized pretty early that we had an opportunity for growth and improvement in the system beyond just combining two transit operations,” says Mountain Line General Manager David Bruffy, who’s held the position since October 1997, after helping to craft the merger as an administrator for the city of Morgantown. “It was a chance to make a difference in the ways things had been done and find new ways of becoming involved in the community.

**Moving Mountaineers**

An expanded role for Mountain Line would only be made possible by increasing the system’s relationship with WVU and the students, faculty and staff active on its campuses. Although WVU’s PRT was largely effective in shuttling students and employees between campus buildings, it did not reach many off-campus housing sites or connect with other crucial aspects of community life – shopping, restaurants and services. It was also focused on school hours, leaving students searching for late-night and weekend alternatives. Meanwhile, the handful of on-campus shuttles operated by the university were oriented to link faculty and students between buildings just out of walking distance, not facilitate trips beyond the school’s boundaries.

In response to the limited options available off-campus, Bruffy and his colleagues at
Mountain Line began working with WVU officials to provide late-night service to university students. By 2002, they had negotiated the first contract between the two entities, allowing students – with a valid WVU ID – to access a new Mountain Line route between on-campus dorms, off-campus housing and entertainment districts in downtown Morgantown. The service steadily built a following among students and in its first year carried more than 60,000 passengers – the buses were also available to the general public. According to Bruffy, the initial late-night service allowed Mountain Line to make inroads with the WVU community, and cultivate a presence for the system in the daily habits of the university.

“The late-night service gave us a foothold with students, and offered them the experience of consistently using transit,” says Bruffy, himself a West Virginia native and WVU alumnus. “It opened the door to increase service and expand our reach into the entire community.”

Leveraging the success of the late night operation, Mountain Line incrementally grew its routes targeted to passengers heading to and from WVU, all the while working closely with university officials to ensure the routes responded to the greatest needs and fit within the school’s trends and initiatives. From the initial 60,000 riders who boarded late-night buses in 2002, Mountain Line now moves more than 700,000 annual trips to WVU destinations. The growth in university-related traffic accounts for the bulk of the system’s current 1.25 million annual riders.

In October 2009, WVU and Mountain Line teamed to open Mountaineer Station, located at the PRT Health Sciences terminal. The 7,000 square foot facility – made possible in part by federal investment secured by the late U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd also includes bus bays for Mountain Line and regional bus routes, bicycle storage – and showers for cyclists – as well as the headquarters for WVU’s Department of Transportation. For WVU officials – who hold a permanent seat on Mountain Line’s seven-member Board of Directors – the relationship is nothing short of mutually beneficial.

“We encourage alternative transportation on our campus and around Morgantown,” says Hugh Kierig, AICP, Director of Transportation and Parking at WVU. “We’re proud that our students, faculty, and staff all have access to the PRT and award-winning regional transit service through Mountain Line.”

The Challenges of Growth

The solid expansion of Mountain Line’s service to WVU is only part – albeit an extremely important aspect – of the system’s overall development as a robust regional transportation provider. In recent years, an influx of new residents and jobs has fostered a new economic climate in the region, as Morgantown’s population climbed by more than 10 percent between 2000 and 2010 to more than 29,600, with Monongalia County experiencing a similar rate of growth. Not only did newcomers find their way to existing Mountain Line routes, but also began requesting new connections throughout the greater Monongahela Valley.
In spite of the area’s dawning population increase, Greyhound eliminated its intercity bus service in Morgantown in late 2005 as part of a national cutback in routes, which linked the city to key regional destinations like Pittsburgh, Fairmont and Clarksburg. Noting the importance of regional linkages to the affected communities – and especially to WVU students – Mountain Line worked quickly to establish the Grey Line intercity service. The operation began days after the final Greyhound bus traveled the route, and runs daily to stops in Clarksburg, Fairmont, Morgantown to reach downtown Pittsburgh – including connections to both Greyhound and Amtrak – as well as Pittsburgh International Airport. Mountain Line recently invested in upgraded vehicles to offer business-class level seating, free wireless internet service and other amenities, helpful for luring riders on the two-hour trip between Morgantown and Pittsburgh.

“The Grey Line was a new concept for us, but it was something that was absolutely essential for not only Morgantown, but places like Fairmont and Clarksburg, too,” says Bruffy.

And the intercity route by no means marks the limit of the system’s ongoing commitment to innovative approaches. Mountain Line recently launched T-OPS – or Transportation Options for veterans and their families – a mobility management effort to help unite veterans and their loved ones with mobility resources throughout the region, including service details, contact information and fare discounts. Moving forward, the system is developing a major service expansion plan to boost frequencies on all routes. Mountain Line is working with local elected officials and community leaders to secure investment for the initiative, which would require additional vehicles and the hiring of more drivers. Part of the effort could also include a new downtown sales and connection center on High Street to further enhance the system’s profile.

“Morgantown is an old community with new growth problems,” explains Bruffy. “It’s our job to not only respond to that growth, but help shape it as best we’re able.”

Transit Across Generations

Among the late-night trips, intercity routes and Twitter feeds that have come to illustrate the contemporary role of Mountain Line in Morgantown and the larger region, the faces of its riders tell the heart of the story of the system’s success. Any given route might feature a knot of students stumbling heading to class, a shift worker returning from a long night of work, or an older person heading to the doctor – all on the same bus. For David Bruffy and his colleagues, it’s that work that provides the true perspective on their mission.

“I’ve seen three generations of one family riding one of our buses together,” says Bruffy. “It’s not hard to stay focused when you see how important this service is to people every day.”
The sun broke through the clouds as we made our way from the mountains in-and-around Morgantown on the afternoon of Thursday, April 28, through the Potomac Valley to Petersburg where J. Carter and his colleagues at the Potomac Valley Transit Authority awaited our arrival. It was great to revisit the PVTA facility that I had first toured at its dedication and the organization’s 30-year anniversary in 2007. Rich and I both found it fitting to be visiting one of West Virginia’s oldest rural systems and to be talking about how its service remains relevant today as the final stop of our tour.

West Virginia’s Potomac Valley is a broad, rolling plain framed by the Allegheny and Shenandoah Mountains and featuring the South Branch of the Potomac River. Located at the far northeastern end of the state, the region encompasses parts of Grant, Mineral, Pendleton, Hampshire and Hardy Counties and is populated by a number of small towns. Serving this 2,700-square mile service area is the Potomac Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) — a 35-year old full-service rural transit operation that in addition to public service emphasizes medical and employment trips.

“This five-county area is known as one of the least populated areas in the United States east of the Mississippi River,” says J. Carter, who, as the only PVTA general manager in its history, knows the region well.

PVTA’s headquarters facility — into which the system moved in 1996 and expanded in 2006 — is located in Petersburg in an industrial park by the community’s airport and offers spectacular views of the mountains beyond. The well-appointed building has ample administrative and operations space and allows

By Scott Bogren

J. Carter has served as PVTA General Manager since the system’s inception.
for adequate maintenance and storage of the system’s 26 vehicles. Such surroundings were not the case at the agency’s inception. As is the case with many rural transit operators around the nation, PVTA’s history is one of making do, survival and, eventually, success.

**Innovative Beginnings**

The modern network of rural transit in West Virginia began in the early 1970s as an effort to connect seniors, people with disabilities and low-income individuals with goods and services.

“People realized that folks in rural areas like this needed transit, too,” says Carter.

An innovative idea emerged — a rural transit ticket program that was run through the state’s Welfare Department where qualified residents could purchase books of tickets worth $8 for $1. The concept was similar to the Food Stamp program and the tickets could be used on local taxis, Greyhound and local bus systems.

Beginning in 1974, West Virginia’s Regional Development Councils began developing plans for regional transit operations to provide service to these rural areas, and in 1975 the Potomac Valley Transit Authority was founded with service beginning two years later.

“I’m the only person who’s ever been in this chair,” says Carter of the general manager position at PVTA as he surveys a desk and office that are far removed from those he occupied more than three decades ago.

**A Regional Focus**

From its very beginning PVTA’s current service modes emerged. With its 20-vehicle fleet, the system took on service into Cumberland, Maryland and Winchester and Harrisonburg, Virginia right away. Employment-based transportation became a staple of the operation in its very early years, with routes to such large job centers as the Baltimore & Ohio rail repair yards, the Hanover and Kinney shoe mills and the JoAnn Curtis sewing factory.

“We were founded in a regional manner and we’ve always taken that role seriously,” says Carter. “We had to think regionally right from the beginning or we would never have been able to fully accomplish our goals.”

“It was apparent from the beginning that work service could provide our system with a steady stream of riders and revenue,” says Carter. “We’ve always been aggressive in seeking out employment transportation opportunities.”

To be able to operate in three states, the system needed authority from the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), which led PVTA’s service area spans six counties and more than 2,700 square miles.
Carter to make his first transit-related trip to the nation’s capital some five hours to the east. He was able to procure temporary authority and has since visited Washington on numerous occasions — often in a leadership role with the West Virginia Public Transit Association.

Today, that regional focus is best exemplified by PVTA’s Ready Ride — a dial-a-ride service the system offers to the public in the Moorefield area, around the region’s most significant employer, Pilgrim’s Pride. Launched in 2007, the service today averages 35 riders daily with some days as many as 80 passengers.

**Time to Move**

Operating out of its original headquarters in downtown Petersburg, PVTA went about the business of providing its unique brand of rural transit with little incident until November of 1985 when rising flood waters changed everything.

“We got word that flooding was likely, but only a foot or so,” says Carter. “So we moved our vehicles out and raised files and radios above what we thought could potentially be flooded.”

By the next morning all of downtown Petersburg was flooded and it would be three days before PVTA employees were allowed back into their headquarters. When they finally came back, they saw a building that had been inundated with seven feet of water.

“Desks had been washed down the valley, walls were gone and uprooted trees blocked the entranceway,” says Carter. “It was time to move.”

A location on West Central Avenue in Petersburg that had avoided the flooding was quickly selected as PVTA’s new home, and efforts began to move what was salvageable from the flooded out facility to the new one. It would be PVTA’s home for the next 11 years.

“The river never flooded the West Central Avenue facility,” recalls Carter. “But summer thunderstorms would occasionally bring enough runoff water to back up against our front door. So we would simply open up the garage door on the other side of the building and let the water flow on through.”

**Seizing the NEMT Opportunity**

In 2001, the Hanover Shoe Company shuttered its Franklin, W.Va., doors for good, leaving PVTA with a fairly significant gap in its service. At the same time, the West Virginia Center for Rural Health was in the process of developing a private foundation grant program to demonstrate sustainable rural health transportation.

“Honestly, I was a bit hesitant at first about the non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT),” says Carter. “It seemed out of our comfort zone, but then Susan O’Connell paid us a visit and asked me if I wanted some other organization here in the Potomac Valley providing NEMT, passengers we were already serving.”

In February of 2001, PVTA launched its nascent NEMT program which today accounts for fully a third of the system’s service and revenues — on average, about 20,000 monthly vehicle miles. The system soon developed a direct billing arrangement with the West Virginia Medicaid program, which brought about more timely billings and payments.

“The success of our non-emergency medical transportation service can be directly attributed to my colleague, Juanita Lloyd,” says Carter. “She made it work through nothing more than hard work. She must have called on every doctor’s office from here to Morgantown when we first started.”

Perhaps most importantly, PVTA’s entry into the NEMT marketplace played a key role in boosting PVTA’s image at a critical time in its development.

“You just can’t underestimate the importance, locally, of helping people get to the doctor, keeping them healthy and independent,” says Carter.

**Change is the Only Constant**

Today, worry furrows J. Carter’s brow as he expresses his anxiety over the state of community and public transit and what the future holds in a discussion with *CT Magazine* staff on a Thursday afternoon. He’s looking for some silver linings right now.

“Between potential changes to Medicaid, the price of fuel and the challenges of maintain-
The Time to Act

ing federal transit investment levels, well, it’s enough to keep me up at night,” says Carter. “Did you know that every time the price of fuel rises by a penny, that’s a more than $700 annual increase for us?”

Carter is also attempting to deal with an increasingly difficult local economic situation that is forcing the counties he serves to make tough decisions about how to spend their limited local dollars. “Our local governments just don’t have anything extra.”

With more than 30 years at the helm of PVTA, Carter knows the first lean times he’s weathered. Yet, even with decades of service, he’s not forgotten the values that led him to rural transit.

For a transit leader who arrived in the Potomac Valley with very specific ideas about public transit — much stemming from his college days at Kent State University in Ohio — it’s confounding.

“I’ve always thought that in a perfect world, public transit would be free to passengers and PVTA would be here to move people wherever they need to go,” says Carter, somewhat wistfully. CT

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Crow Nation Launches New Transit Service

Utilizing two body-on-chassis vehicles and one minivan, Crow Nation Transit has initiated service on three routes across the Crow Reservation and in Big Horn County in southern Montana. The effort to launch the system began four years ago, when the Crow Nation worked with the Community Transportation Association’s Tribal Passenger Transportation Technical Assistance Program and LSC Transportation Consultants to study the region’s mobility needs and develop a service plan. That plan led to today’s service, with routes linking Billings, Wyola, Pryor, Crow Agency and Fort Smith. Additional routes — along with more vehicles — are expected to be added over the coming months and years, and the entire service will be continually re-evaluated to maximize responsiveness and efficiency.

“People like riding the bus because it’s comfortable, and, with the high cost of gas, people who own cars are paying less to get to where they want to go if they use the bus,” says Oliver Hill, Director of Crow Nation Transit. “Some are saying this is a long time coming.”

Rabbittransit to Link York and Gettysburg with Intercity Route

Building on its rabbitEXPRESS intercity service between York, Pa. and Towson, Md., York County’s rabbittransit will launch a new route between Harrisburg and Gettysburg in early June. The new service will include two weekday roundtrips between the two cities during the morning and evening rush hours. The trips will originate at the Gettysburg Transfer Center — where it will connect with the Adams County Transit Authority, Gettysburg’s transit operator — and the Gateway Park and Ride lot before stopping in Dillsburg enroute to Harrisburg. In downtown Harrisburg, the route will stop at the Harrisburg Transportation Center — which service Amtrak trains, along with several intercity bus providers, including Greyhound — and make several connections with Capital Area Transit, Harrisburg’s transit system. The buses will feature free wireless internet access.

New Shuttle Debuts for Michigan Veterans

With the May 2 launch of the Veterans Transportation Service, veterans in Livingston and Wayne counties (Mich.) now have reliable access to the Ann Arbor VA Medical Center and System. The service focuses on remote areas with little existing access to public and community transit options, and is free to any veteran with a valid ID and an appointment at the VA facility. The operation also welcomes caregivers and service animals to accompany veteran riders. The shuttles stop in Allen Park, Belleville, Brighton, Canton, Hartland, Howell, Livonia, Northville, Taylor, Westland and Wixom.

Basin Transit Authority (Utah) Begins Service

Featuring free rides through the end of May, the Basin Transit Authority began service earlier in the month with connections between Duchesne City, Roosevelt, and Vernal, along with local routes in Vernal. The region occupies the northeastern corner
Transit Notes

of Utah, near the Colorado and Wyoming borders. The new system intends to attract commuters, seniors, people with disabilities and shoppers who previously had no access to public transportation options. A mix of investment from federal, state and local sources made the new service possible.

“It’s a progressive move for the area,” said Basin Transit Authority Director Richard Wallis. “It’s options. Whether it be because of disabilities, whether it be due to finances, or whether it be for their feeling toward the environment, people want options. “We can grow this. We can add routes over time. We can add frequency over time. As we move forward, we can support it by using it.”

Expanded Taxi Voucher Program Implemented in Pendleton (Ore.)

Focused on helping students at Blue Mountain Community College, the city of Pendleton recently expanded mobility options by instituting a new taxi voucher program. At only $2 a ride, the program works with the city’s taxi company – Elite Taxi – to provide service anywhere within the city limits. The college distributes the voucher tickets at its student services desk. The effort replaces a gas card program that had become less effective due to rising fuel prices, although students travelling from outlying areas can still purchase $25 gas cards. The program will be studied over the summer to determine its viability for future semesters.

“I think, especially with how fuel prices are, this sort of transportation for the students could be a great asset,” said Vicente Escalante, BMCC student body president. “This will help the school, just showing how much we care about our students. We want to make sure they can get up here, any way possible.”

Grand Rapids Voters Approve New Millage; System to Hire Drivers, Buy Buses

With a vote on May 3, Kent County (Mich.) residents voted to increase their local tax levy to support an expanded role for the region’s The Rapid transit network. The millage will deliver $15.6 million per year to the system and allow for the addition of the new Silver Line bus rapid transit route on Division Avenue in Grand Rapids. The system will also offer increased service frequencies on all routes, with overall service hours extending to 11:15 p.m., on weekdays. To accommodate the new Silver Line project, as well as the expanded service, the system plans to hire 51 new drivers and purchase 17 new buses – an important boost to the economy during challenging times.

"I think increasing mass transit would be good for Grand Rapids, said East Grand Rapids resident Laura Paschall. "I'm willing to chip in and help pay for that. We need to conserve resources and use the transit system more. Anything that will increase mass transit and helps people to get around, I'm for.”
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New Route Connects Manhattan with Fort Riley and Junction City (Kansas)

Linking the university community of Manhattan – home to Kansas State University – with the Fort Riley military base and nearby Junction City, the new route operated by a TaBus connects Riley County communities for the first time. The deviated fixed-route service operates on weekdays from 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., with $2 fares for trips within a three-mile radius of any of the communities or $4 for rides outside those limits. The service is the result of a partnership between the state of Kansas and local agencies.

“This service is a direct result of our efforts to provide regional, centrally-dispatched transit service in Kansas communities,” said Joel Skelley, state multimodal planner for the Kansas Department of Transportation. “Through a partnership of the state and the Flint Hills Area Transportation Agency, the communities will have an interconnected service that will be more efficient than what could be provided by individual providers and easier for riders to use.”

Nassau Express Transit Begins Service in Northern Florida

Expanding its offerings beyond demand-response service for seniors and people with disabilities, the Council on Aging of Nassau County (Fla.) recently launched its Nassau Express Transit program with two fixed route bus lines. The two routes connect Jacksonville with Fernandina Beach and Hillard, with the former route stopping in Yulee and the latter in Callahan, before heading to downtown Jacksonville. The routes will connect with Jacksonville Transportation Authority routes at the Rosa Parks Transit Station, which also offers links to Jacksonville’s elevated Skyway system. Fares on the new routes are only $1. The Council on Aging has operated its demand-response Transportation Disadvantaged service since 1984, and will operate the Nassau Express Transit with support from federal, state and local sources.


Legislation recently introduced by Rep. Peter DeFazio (Ore.) [H.R. 1795] would promote increased public transportation use, to promote increased use of alternative fuels in providing public transportation. By providing $1.7 billion in capital and operating assistance, transit agencies could respond to increasing ridership and state budget challenges without cutting service or raising fares.
ABOUT US

Community Transportation Magazine is the voice of the Community Transportation Association, a national association dedicated to making mobility alternatives available to all Americans. The Association’s Board of Directors provides national leadership and direction for the Association. The Board relies on the special expertise of its State Delegate Council to assist in their important efforts.

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