



By Beth Wilson

Charting Florida's Mobility Course

It was tales of easy remedy and riches that launched Juan Ponce de Leon's voyage of discovery 1513. When his ship landed on the Atlantic Coast, he proclaimed the land *Pascua de Florida* — feast of flowers. Paradise, he hoped, was a destination.

Pedro Menendez de Aviles was a little more practical when he arrived a half century later. Time and labor produced a string of forts and

a growing permanent settlement in Florida. But against war and weather, the wooden structures faltered.

To protect its interests, the Spanish Crown in 1672 invested in a new fortress. This one was to be stronger, enduring. Builders chose a unique material found near the coast — coquina rock. While individually fragile, broken seashells and corals in mass had come together over time, cementing a bond that was

virtually indestructible. Planning and construction of Castillo de San Marcos lasted over 20 years. The walls of the fortress — against enemies and hurricanes — have stood for over 300.

Not unlike coquina, mobility networks are more than the sum of their parts — achieving strength and endurance as many and varied pieces come together to create a community and public transporta-

Connecting Communities that Connect a County: Broward County Transit & the City of Pembroke Pines

tion structure that fortifies through connections.

Florida's modern mobility course was first charted by entrepreneurs like Henry Morrison Flagler, who brought passenger rail first to the state's burgeoning east coast in the early part of the 20th Century, and who eventually — with much determination — built the line all the way down to Key West. By the 1950s, transit, in the form of numerous rail and bus lines, traversed the state as its population began to greatly expand. And as modern Florida began to change, community and public transportation has responded. The latter part of the last century saw systems develop to best serve the state's growing senior population and to meet the needs of Floridians who came to be described as transportation disadvantaged.

Each of these transportation systems, like the Castillo de San Marcos's sturdy coquina rock, has added another vital layer to Florida's diverse mobility network. Sometimes through swamps, other times over open ocean; serving swiftly growing cities like Miami, Tampa and Jacksonville, or rural communities; connecting seniors and commuters and everyone else, the state of Florida enjoys an array of community and public transportation systems and services.

Earlier this year, *Community Transportation* magazine writer Beth Wilson and Membership Director Caryn Souza traveled the length of Florida, compiling the series of community and public transportation profiles that follow. From the Panhandle to the Keys, from city to suburb to small town, they found a mobility network that has fused together over time to serve all Floridians — a network as strong and enduring as the coquina rock.

The Southwest Focal Point Senior Center is a busy place. Lunch service ended some time ago, and many people have moved on to other interests — a beginner's Mah Jongg class, a game of billiards, a good book in the free-lending library, a stroll in the outdoor gardens, a comfy chair in the facility's expansive rotunda.

From the right chair, you have a good view of the Center's entrance, where vehicles — and their passengers — are coming and going. One of the forces that keeps them coming and going is just off the rotunda in the City of Pembroke Pines' Transportation Division. Another force lies 22 miles away in the coastal City of Pompano Beach, in the offices of Broward County Transit.

One of three expansive counties comprising the South Florida metropolitan area, Broward County stretches 1,200 square miles, and is home for nearly 1.8 million people. Beyond its well-known county seat and popular tourist destination — Fort Lauderdale — Broward includes 30 other incorporated cities and towns, as well as numerous unincorporated areas. All of them are growing. The county's population is expected to increase nearly 50 percent by 2030.

Broward County Transit is one of Florida's largest public transportation operators serving one of the state's fastest growing and most dynamic communities. The system's nearly 300 fixed-route buses connect local residents across the region with jobs, health care, schools and more. To ensure it continues

to meet local demand, the system even has developed an innovative local bus solution that feeds into the fixed-route operation and allows it to serve more residents.

"Historically, we were trying to serve everyone," says Broward County Transit's Manager of Paratransit Services Ed Wisniewski of the enormous challenge presented by the county's geography and demographics. "Our bus routes went in zig zags and curly Qs. With limited resources, it made better sense to run north-south and east-west. But that left pockets of the county without a way to get to these lines."

Enter the Community Bus.

While 285 40-foot Broward County Transit vehicles fan out across a 435-square-mile service area, more than 20 locally crafted Community Bus systems broaden mobility's reach with local connections. Leasing vehicles, partnering in driver training, offering design expertise and providing an operational stipend, Broward County Transit enables municipalities like Pembroke Pines to create, tweak and maintain the local links that best serve their community, and tie it to the broader Broward County Transit network.

Pembroke Pines' Gold and Green routes operate 18-passenger vehicles that can easily maneuver in and out of the city's neighborhoods, connecting the general public to the supermarkets, the post office, Price Park, local schools, shopping complexes, Memorial Hospital, Century Village retirement community, the Southwest Focal Point Senior Center and much more. Both routes meet at Pembroke Lakes



Community Bus Service is locally designed to compliment and leverage Broward County Transit's fixed-route system.

Mall, where they connect with neighboring Miramar's Community Bus system and with Broward County Transit's Routes 3, 5, 7 and 23 — making possible links to just about anywhere in the county.

"The need for transportation is great. This is an excellent way to coordinate service," says City of Pembroke Pines Transportation Administrator Althia Ellis. "Our smaller systems are complementing the large county system, reaching out to more individuals who we're better able to serve. The partnership creates a continuity of service, almost a seamless system. And it provides residents and visitors with transportation options."

The seamless strategy is working. Ridership on Broward County Transit's fixed-route system has increased 29 percent since 2001. Ridership on the Pembroke Pines Community Bus has increased 39 percent in just the last year, providing nearly 183,000 trips in

2005. The City of Pembroke Pines' Transportation Department is there at the grassroots level, witnessing changes, receiving requests, modifying service. It puts the *community* in the Community Bus.

A Win-Win-Win Solution

The county and city transportation systems broadened their innovative partnership in 1997. Broward County Transit saw an opportunity to improve community transportation services by drawing on Pembroke Pines' mobility strength.

The City of Pembroke Pines established its nutrition program nearly three decades ago with its own vehicles, drivers and dollars. The program expanded with community needs — and with additional support from and the Aging and Disability Resource Center of Broward County and Community Development Block Grant funding

— to link registered clients 55 years and older and persons with disabilities to the Southwest Focal Point Senior Center, medical appointments, pharmacies, supermarkets, shopping centers and recreational field trips through both subscription and reservation door-to-door service.

Meanwhile, some of Broward County Transit's customers were boarding the fixed-route provider's paratransit service to access the same Senior Center. Why devote two separate transportation services to the same destination? The coordination opportunity was obvious. Now, Pembroke Pines provides a specialized segment of Broward County Transit's service — known as Transportation Options or TOPS — in Pembroke Pines and five other surrounding municipalities.

"We realized there were these senior centers out there providing transportation to their centers. We said, 'Let's tap into that resource,'"

Florida's Transportation Disadvantaged Program: Filling in the Gaps

By Beth Wilson

The need for mobility knows no bounds. While an expansive number of innovative community and public transportation systems — supported by vital local, state and federal investment programs — exist, there are always individuals who fall outside the net. A number of strong-willed advocates in Florida, including Dr. William and Budd Bell, understood the consequences for communities, and in 1979 their determination produced a legislative mandate to coordinate all human service transportation through one local, countywide entity.

The logic was simple. Instead of one van picking up a Medicaid-sponsored rider while the Department of Elder Affairs paid for a separate van to transport their next-door neighbor to the same destination, someone could match the trips and place them on the same vehicle. Identify resources, coordinate demand, improve service. A Coordinating Council within the Florida Department of Transportation was established.

Momentum grew after new legislation in 1989 upgraded the coordination statute and created a dedicated funding stream for the program. A 50-cent motor vehicle tag fee produced a \$4.5 million trust fund, to be administered by an independent Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged.

A year later, the Commission's

charge further expanded with 15 percent of the public transit portion of the state transportation trust fund, expanding the Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund.

"There are places people need to go that no funding source is going to pay for, but they're desperately needed trips — to the pharmacy, to the bank, to the grocery store," says the Commission's Executive Director Lisa Bacot, explaining the reality that drove the 1989 legislation. "When we received funding in 1989, people really stepped up to the plate."

Regional planning organizations helped establish Local Coordinating Boards, with agency representatives, local officials, advocates and passengers setting funding priorities and providing oversight. More transportation needs were brought under the Community Transportation Coordinator umbrella. More rides were coordinated. More service provided. Yet still, the coordination progress couldn't keep pace with need. Some people still couldn't get where they needed to go.

"Over the years, former Executive Director JoAnn Hutchinson was diligent in getting providers to report trips that they were unable to provide," says Bacot. "When someone called and said 'I need a trip to wherever,' the Commission started collecting data — Where did they need to go? Why could the provider

not fulfill the request? Was it funding? Was it lack of a driver? Was it lack of a lift-equipped vehicle?"

The collected data told a powerful story, one the Commission presented to Florida legislators. The number was staggering: one million unmet trips a year.

The Commission was successful in securing a higher tag fee, now \$1.50. In addition to its percentage of state public transit dollars, the Commission receives \$5 for every \$15 temporary-disability parking permit sold. Additionally, vehicle renewal forms now include a voluntary check off, enabling individuals to make a donation to the Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund. These contributions go directly to individual counties where the vehicles are registered. Rural counties, says Bacot, have been most successful in producing these local dollars, using clever campaigns, such as a specialized postal mark reminding people to donate, or a vehicle wrap that carries the same message.

The Transportation Disadvantaged Trust Fund has expanded to \$38 million and supports over 6.5 million trips annually.

"There are trips out there that are being provided everyday, and that's what we want to see. We want to see people getting out and getting where they need to go," says Bacot.

says Wisniewski.

Eligible individuals register with Broward County Transit and schedule rides with the Southwest Focal Point Senior Center. Here, trips are combined and drivers familiar with local passengers steer City vehicles to and from opportunities at the Center. The Pembroke Pines Transportation Division is providing

some 175 daily Nutrition trips and 100 TOPS trips a day, with Broward County Transit reimbursing the city service on a per-trip basis.

"It's a win-win-win solution," says Wisniewski. "The clients have drivers that know them and bring them to their Center. The agency gets additional resources. And we're getting those people serviced very well

at a lower rate. They offer a superb, personal service that best fits these passengers' needs."

Just the kind of service driver Sherria Campbell delivers.

"We're very family oriented. We really care. It's not just a job," says Campbell, who's been connecting passengers on the City's door-to-door services for five years.

She connects passengers with the Center, the doctor, the bank, the post office. She takes some grocery shopping, some to visit spouses in the nursing home, some to the Friday senior dances. When each of last year's hurricanes approached, she phoned passengers to check on their

more doors and connect passengers with more flexibility, the county-wide provider offers riders free travel training — lessons in navigating the fixed-route system with a professional instructor.

"We start with the basics. 'Tell me your limitations, your fears,'"

people get where they want to go," say Kluck, who says she can't help "researching" — bus stops, sidewalks, curbs, traffic flow, intersections, vehicle capacity — even on her day off. "When I get that call saying, 'My spouse passed away. I haven't been out in two years!' it's time to go to work. I'll call to follow up, and they're never home! That's a good sign!"



Non-traditional thinking, says Broward County Transit's Ed Wisniewski, can lead to more effective mobility solutions.

preparedness, and followed up with them after the storm. Sherria says that level of care comes with the job.

"Passengers are so used to their driver that we're like family. We observe. And we feed information to the right people. Your driver is your key person to see any warning signs," she explains. "I know how important this is. The service will one day do the same for me."

Opening More Doors

While door-to-door service provides a vital link, improving community participation for individuals who might otherwise remain isolated, fixed-route service offers passengers more flexibility and wider, regional connections. More places to go, more ways to go there, going there on your own timetable. Expanding choices is Broward County Transit's goal. To open

explains Travel Trainer Sue Kluck. "And then the obvious question, 'Where do you want to go?!'"

Kluck provides guidance to individuals and agencies throughout Broward County. She makes periodic presentations to groups at places like the Southwest Focal Point Senior Center to remind them of their options, and of the ways in which she can help them use those options.

With guidance and practice, obstacles can be eliminated, confidence instilled. Kluck usually works one-on-one with a new passenger, ensuring their familiarity with the route they'll be riding, sometimes driving them a county car first and pointing out memorable landmarks. Landmarks, she explains, are fail-safe cues to guide the bus rider.

"I tell people, 'There's no limit to training with me.' We want to help

Redefining Transportation

The strongest web of transportation connections in the growing South Florida area will depend on many diverse threads. Broward County Transit's partnerships with local communities can help identify and deliver the kind of dynamic transportation solutions that respond to changing mobility needs. As the region's population expands, relocates, makes career transitions, starts families, attracts visitors, welcomes new residents and ages in place, the network of county and local, fixed-route and door-to-door services can take them where they need to go.

"The challenge for transit agencies, especially in South Florida, is that as the population gets older, traditional ways of providing transit may not work. Realizing this got us going with the Community Bus idea," says Wisniewski. "In the future, there will be more individual, community-based transit programs that work within, say, a 7-to-10-mile service area — focused locally and coordinated regionally. Transit agencies will have to redefine themselves and use some of their resources for these kinds of creative solutions."

Some, like Broward County Transit, already have.

Dynamic Partnerships West Florida Regional Planning Council And Tri- County Community Council

Mike Moody had found a good career opportunity. The engineering position with Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort on Florida's Gulf Coast was, however, nearly 70 miles from his home in Florala, Alabama. It was a long drive that was becoming increasingly expensive and aggravating. Many of his colleagues were facing similar commuting challenges.

"Some didn't have big enough cars. There were so many of us. Sometimes even trying to fit seven or eight. It was a mess," remembers Moody. "So I went searching for something better."

Something better, it turns out, was right beside him on the road. A Tri-County Community Council, Inc., van. With room for 15.

Florida's transportation network has been able to respond to the needs of all its residents. Van pool programs like this one are an ideal response to connecting employees with jobs and have helped forge dynamic mobility partnerships that will be able to innovatively respond to their community's changing transportation needs.

Any Kind of Solution

The jewel of West Florida — the Emerald Coast — is a popular vacation destination. Lined with Gulf-kissed beaches, visitors come for the sun, the golf and the fish. Awaiting them — and providing the backbone of the local economy — are the many hotels, resorts, shops and restaurants



Whether it's a shopping trip or a medical appointment, Vivian (r.) knows from experience that she can depend on Tri-County Community Council

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dotting the peninsula. The significant development and wealth generation along the southern coast has created a housing disconnect, with most of the labor force seeking more affordable housing to the north.

The dynamic economy, shifting populations, commuting distances and growing congestion require new strategies ... like the vanpool devised through a partnership of business, labor, transportation planners and a community transportation provider in West Florida. The one that started with Mike Moody's phone call.

"I'd seen these vans all up and down the roads. I said, 'That's what we need! Let's get one of them!'"

Moody took down the phone number emblazoned on the vehicles and called. Tri-County Community Council answered.

"Come to find out it was for anyone who needed it. We started from there," says Moody.

Tri-County Community Council, Inc., operates vehicles that connect passengers with medical care, training and employment opportunities, shopping and more. Moody's phone call presented a new opportunity to serve. The Sandestin Resort employees had decided that a vanpool was the solution to their transportation challenge. Tri-County Community Council, however, had no experience with vanpools. West Florida Regional Planning Council did.

"I've always been a fighter for community transportation providers to come on board and learn some of the policies that we use," says Transportation Planner Dan Deanda about the West Florida Commuter Assistance Program, better known

as Ride On. "We're very flexible with what we do with our program, and we can design any kind of solution."

The Planning Council's Ride On program is funded by the Florida Department of Transportation, and aims to promote transportation solutions, commuter choice and stronger communities. Addressing transportation issues in 10 counties, the program brings together private employers, workers and transportation providers to develop effective strategies. With the aid of ride-matching software, the program can direct people to their best connection: carpools, vanpools or transit systems.

Expanding the Community's Connections

Moody and Deanda saw that Tri-County Community Council as the Sandestin Resort employee group's best alternative. Deanda assisted Tri-County's Assistant Director Annette Stewart in developing the route and schedule, and identifying a park-and-ride location. Stewart worked out the costs, and Tri-County applied to the Florida Department of Transportation for a commuter assistance grant. With that funding source covering 50 percent of the cost of service, the employer and employees agreed to cover the rest. A \$5.00 daily contribution covered Moody's 135 miles.

"You really can't beat that," Moody says. "Look at what you are paying for the use of your own vehicle, the wear and tear, the repairs, the gas and oil. And you wake up in the morning with no guarantee that thing's going to run. Coming on the van is a better deal. It's very dependable. They'll pick you up at a certain spot and bring you to work and take you back. Guaranteed!"

The ride's dependability is important to his employer, too, as is the connection's simplicity.

"Employers don't have the time or the expertise. Employers want

Another regional partner, Pensacola Bay Transportation Co., connects communities in Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties.



Disney's Monorail: A Magical Transit Connection

By Rich Sampson

Emerging from inside the Contemporary Resort hotel, and winding along the banks of the Seven Seas Lagoon, the Walt Disney World monorail system is in many ways unlike any other transportation service in Florida. Yet, while connecting three hotels with Disney World's own downtown district, the Magic Kingdom, EPCOT Center and Disney's own version of an intermodal facility at the Transportation & Ticket Center, the monorail also finds several common aspects with the state's community and public transportation network.

First opened in 1971 in unison with the new theme park, the sleek, 6-car monorail trains have become a symbol for Walt Disney World, as

they quickly and quietly moved scores of visitors from parking facilities to the park's hotels and attractions along a 9.4-mile loop. A four-mile extension from the Transportation & Ticket Center was opened in 1982 to coincide with the opening of EPCOT. The current system can now accommodate more than 150,000 daily visitors across its three lines.

The current 12-train fleet of Mark VI monorail vehicles, each distinguished by a different colored stripe, was delivered by Bombardier in 1989, to replace the original Mark



IV vehicles built by Martin Marietta. The trains are nearly identical to those that operate over 2.5-mile route at Disneyland in Anaheim, Calif. The fleet is powered by third-rail electric current alongside the track-bed, and each train is operated manually by Disney's monorail operators. Maintenance and dispatch operations are also performed by Disney staff.

something that's very simple, very turnkey," explains Sandestin's Vice President of Human Resources Sylvia Hanks, who stresses that most businesses don't want to add transit administration to their already full plate.

Today, Sandestin Resort pays a daily fee for use of the Tri-County vehicle, insurance and fuel. Tri-County takes care of maintenance, billing and grant administration, and stands ready with a backup vehicle and driver. An employee in the vanpool — someone checked and certified by Tri-County — drives the van and keeps it overnight at his home so it's ready to show up each morning at a local shopping center parking lot where fellow commuters board.

"The mobility is just critical to us. As with any resort destination area, affordable housing is quite limited here. Many on our staff come from outlying communities. Some can't

make that drive or can't afford that round trip each day," says Hanks. "Through the vanpool, we're investing in our employees. That lessens our turnover. We're able to retain and maintain our high-performance staff."

Some employees carpool to the vanpool's meeting point; others live close enough to walk. Though the occupants have changed over time, the seats are always full. Now in its seventh year, the vanpool — and the partnership that makes it possible — is going strong.

The West Florida Mobility Network

The Sandestin Resort vanpool is one solution in a region of mobility challenges. The metropolitan area and its beaches are growing denser as tourism and the economy grow, providing opportunities for employers like Sandestin Resort and its em-

ployees in the Tri-County vanpool. But many transit trips originate further east and north, in rural communities with different mobility challenges. Back at Tri-County Community Council's office in rural Holmes County, scheduler Cindy Jackson is helping passengers meet them. Vivian, waiting for the Tri-County van to come back through Bonifay and take her home to Caryville, is thanking her for rescheduling her medical appointment and coordinating her ride.

"I've lived in different places in the country. This is the best transportation I've ever had," commends Vivian, highlighting assistance that goes beyond the ride itself. "One of my doctors is in Fort Walton, about 75 miles away. And I can even take transit to a specialist in Birmingham. That's a four-hour drive."

Having experienced community transportation's dependability and



West Florida Regional Planning Council's Senior Transportation Planner Mary Robinson (seated), Transportation Planner Julia Pearsall and Transportation Planner/Ride-On Specialist Dan Deanda help steer the region's mobility solutions.

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indispensability after surgery that required follow-up appointments, Vivian was impressed. Requiring ongoing medical care, she is now a regular customer. And not just connecting with doctors.

"Tomorrow is a shopping day. All day. It's lots of fun. Usually the same group of women," explains Vivian. "I can depend on Tri-County for everything."

The West Florida Regional Planning Council works in partnership with Tri-County Community Council; with Okaloosa County Transit, coordinating transportation in Okaloosa County; and with the Pensacola Bay Transportation Company, coordinating options in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties — including the City of Pensacola.

"We're very familiar with our rural areas and with our riders," says Stewart of Tri-County's coordination strategies.

She outlines cost-saving, service enhancing strategies: a safety and training program that has reduced the agency's number of incidents and therefore its insurance costs. Partnerships with the counties served that have provided office and yard space, reduced vehicle repair costs and a valuable senior escort service. State programs that enable the agency to apply for an annual gas tax refund and to include a depreciation rate in their fares also help the budget. The organization is constantly seeking new ways to do more.

A Transferable Partnership

The West Florida Regional Planning Council had been working for years to improve mobility options through Florida's Transportation Disadvantaged Program.

The Sandestin vanpool repre-

sents the beneficial melding of two state programs — the Commuter Assistance Program and the Transportation Disadvantaged Program — through a powerful partnership that already existed between planning agency and transportation coordinator.

Leveraging that valuable partnership in the RideOn program only made sense.

"We have these transportation professionals in place. The vehicles are in place. The drivers are in place. The insurance is in place. They don't require us to start from scratch," explains Deanda, who himself commutes to work in a vanpool.

The Council also acknowledges the work of Vanpool Services Inc., more commonly known as VPSI, in helping them to establish these flexible mobility solutions.

"VPSI has always been a very big part in helping us organize and start vanpools, making it easier for the employer to jump on board with some understanding," says Deanda.

Deanda is currently discussing possibilities with an area employer that's expanding its workforce by 100. Pensacola Bay Transportation Company is mapping potential routes and determining costs. A new manager with a resort in Fort Walton Beach wants access to a wider labor pool. He phoned the RideOn program this morning. Deanda told him how the West Florida Regional Planning Council and its community transportation partners are building a mobility network on flexibility, customer service and options.

"We can do very well by employers in helping them set up their own vanpool program," says Deanda.

"But they're not transportation experts, and they don't want to be. What they want is an easy solution to dependably connect employees to the workplace. Community transportation providers are the perfect resource."

Tri-Rail: The Commuter Rail System That Could...

By Rich Sampson



Intending to remediate the effects of a 1980s major construction project on I-95 — the main commuting thoroughfare between Florida's Broward, Dade and Palm Beach Counties — South Florida's Tri-Rail has grown into a major public transportation system that highlights the flexibility and responsiveness of the state's transit systems.

All efforts were made to ensure the cost-effectiveness of the Tri-Rail system. The commuter rail service would operate on a freight line paralleling I-95. And since the trains were not certain to continue operation once the interstate re-opened, planners crafted a flexible approach in case the service was to continue or be disbanded once the highway project was completed.

The service would operate between Miami International Airport through Ft. Lauderdale to West Palm Beach. The multi-jurisdictional authority charged with creating the rail line brokered a deal with GO Transit in Toronto, Ontario to lease several Bombardier-built BiLevel coaches to Tri-Rail, with the option for the latter agency to purchase them afterwards if the service was made permanent. Arriving in Southern Florida in 1989, the new cars

proved ideal for deploying a commuter service on an existing freight rail route by maximizing passenger capacity and channeling riders quickly in and out of the vehicle. Their success was such that even when work on I-95 was completed by 1989, Tri-Rail and its BiLevel cars had gained a foothold with Miami area commuters. The service was made permanent that year, and has since added train frequency and

a.m., and 9:00 p.m., every week-day, with more frequent service during rush hours. Nineteen stations now dot the 72-mile route, which is undergoing renovation to add a second track along the entire line and allow for expanded train frequency. The project is expected to increase ridership to more than 27,000 daily riders by 2015, up from its current average of 11,000.

Innovation at Tri-Rail continues

The service has since added train frequency and riders to become a vital aspect of the area's transportation options.

riders to become a vital aspect of the area's transportation options.

"Having the vehicles available immediately allowed our service to gain a foothold in the region's transportation habits and helped ensure the ultimate sustainability of Tri-Rail," says Brad Barkman of the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority, which oversees Tri-Rail.

Now in its 17th year of service, the once vanguard operation is now a full-fledged commuter rail service. Trains operate at least once every hour between 4:00

today. It will welcome the first new self-propelled commuter rail vehicles built in more than half a century with the arrival of the double-deck Diesel Multiple Unit this spring. Built by Colorado Railcar, Inc, the vehicles can not only pull their own weight, but that of two additional bi-level cars without a locomotive. Tri-Rail trains will not only benefit from more efficient operation, but also be able to move more passengers per train, as the traditional diesel locomotive fleet cannot hold riders.



Part of Florida's mobility past, Henry Flagler built destinations—like the magnificent Ponce de Leon Hotel that now houses Flagler College—and the means to get there. Part of Florida's mobility future, the St. Johns County Council on Aging is building mobility options - the means to connect a dynamic community.

Pickin' Up Good Vibrations **St. Johns County's Sunshine Bus**

It's Game Day, warns Cathy Brown, executive director of the St. Johns County Council on Aging. The tables in the Coastal Community Center's dining hall are full, and visitors are concentrating fervently on the cards in front of them.

Outside the Center a Sunshine Bus — easily recognized with its bright yellow sunburst logo — pulls up to the curb. And out steps Adlai Stevenson's secretary. No kidding. Now in her nineties, Peg McIntire still works — one day a week at a candle shop in downtown St. Augustine. The deviated fixed-route service gets her there. But not today. Today she's got lunch plans here at the Coastal Community Center. A Green Line bus picked her up near her home; she transferred to the Red Line; and now, if you'll excuse

her please, she wants to find a seat in the dining hall.

Expanding on its demand-response service for seniors, the Council on Aging introduced its Sunshine Bus in 2000, with its five color-coded routes linking anyone who hops aboard to work, the grocery store, the county Government Center, the hospital, the workforce development office, the mall and more. What started as a small mobility seed in St. Johns County has blossomed into an expansive, flexible transportation system that is evolving alongside its community.

Building on Sound Infrastructure

Soon after Florida's Transportation Disadvantaged Program got un-

derway in 1979, St. Johns County set its priorities. With a couple of vans, the Council on Aging began providing trips to dialysis treatment and medical care for seniors. And as time has passed, the service expanded to life-enhancing trips, connecting seniors to the activities at the Coastal Community Center.

"But we kept hearing passengers talk — "I want to go here. I want to go there. And I want to go when I want to go," remembers Brown, highlighting the senior van service's constrictions — advanced reservations and limited destinations. "People wanted to go shopping. It seemed ludicrous that we couldn't take them shopping. But there simply weren't enough resources."

Commissioner Jim Bryant had ideas, too. St. Johns County had for

years been a largely rural area. No longer. Between 1970 and 1990, the population in unincorporated areas more than tripled. The county was continuing to grow at an unprecedented rate. Bryant helped launch the Community Health Improvement Partnership in the late 1990s to explore how best to meet the needs of current and incoming residents. Committee members discovered that many needs shared a common element: transportation. Bryant turned to the transportation experts.

"We took advantage of the infrastructure that the Council on Aging already had in place," explains Bryant. "You're able to do a lot of things by sharing the same infrastructure."

The Council on Aging pooled some resources for a trial run. For the next three months the organization operated a general public deviated fixed-route service along US 1, connecting passengers to services and opportunities in the downtown area and along US 1.

"We were sort of flying by the seat of our pants. We had no money for marketing, so we got the newspaper to run the bus schedules for free, and we got a billboard company to put up a free ad," remembers Brown. "It was instantly successful!"

With a triumphant trial run, Bryant and Brown knew they were on the right track. But moving ahead, and expanding service, would require resources. Neighboring counties were facing similar financial challenges in their attempts to expand mobility options. A regional collaboration enabled multiple transportation needs to dovetail.

Getting to Work ... and Everyplace Else

Workforce development efforts in northeast Florida were once divided, with service delivery for metropolitan Jacksonville separate from services in surrounding counties.



The Council on Aging's Senior Transportation service connects community members to meals and activities. Together, the demand-response service and the more flexible Sunshine Bus enable everyone, says Brown (above, standing) to, "be in the game."





Passenger Peg McIntire finds the Sunshine Bus the perfect transportation option for on-the-go nonagenarians like herself.

A great number of seniors have become regular riders. They like the flexibility of daily service and the convenience of not having to walk all the way to a designated stop.

With more and more workers in the area seeking job opportunities in Jacksonville, a regional approach to employment transportation made sense. First Coast Workforce Development — known locally as WorkSource — was created to serve a six-county area.

“The majority of people from the outlying counties go into Jacksonville for work everyday. We realized that any kind of cohesive strategy would involve the whole area joining together,” says WorkSource Vice President of Policy Bryan Stone. “We stopped looking at things

individually and starting looking at everything holistically. One of the huge issues that came to light real fast was transportation. We put together a structure to be able to start addressing those needs.”

The structure turned out to be a vital partnership among the Jacksonville Transportation Authority and the counties of Nassau, Duval, St. Johns, Clay, Putnam and Baker. The resulting consortium developed a strategy based on county feeder services connecting to the Authority’s metropolitan fixed-route system, and ultimately to employment op-

portunities.

“A regional partnership is critical,” explains Jacksonville Transportation Authority’s ChoiceRide Coordinator Liz Peak. You can’t have a thorough transportation system just where the jobs are and not where the people are living.”

The ChoiceRide partnership applied for and received federal Job Access and Reverse Commute investment, with the Authority and WorkSource supplying matching dollars. Each county then crafted connections that would best meet its residents’ needs. Data collected in a recent regional study predicted that St. Johns’ population could not support a traditional fixed-route system until 2020. So the St. Johns County Council on Aging got innovative. Maybe “traditional” wasn’t what the community needed. The Council chose a deviated fixed route but without designated stops. Anyone could flag down a ride along the route.

The Sunshine Bus’ 100 passengers a day soon grew to 300, then 800.

“We started getting a lot of attention, and we just really took off,” says Brown. “Now, everybody’s riding. We’re an equal opportunity ride.”

Transit has become a visible component in the community’s infrastructure. And that recognition has led to increased demand. Brown says that vocal passengers give her a strong voice when she goes before the Board of County Commissioners, which from the beginning has dependably supported the Sunshine Bus with annual investment from the general fund.

“It is much more cost effective to fund transit,” says Bryant of the multi-pronged impact of connections. “And the Council on Aging has been very good at taking the County support and leveraging other money in other programs to help expand the system. Cathy can

go out and leverage six to eight dollars for every dollar we give her.”

Witnessing such good stewardship, the County has recently facilitated additional resources. Every time St. Johns County has approved new development in the past six months, officials request that developers invest in the transportation system. Though not a formal requirement, the appeal has been lucrative in the fast growing area.

Today, two full-time and nine part-time drivers steer six Sunshine Buses along five routes, outlined in the printed schedule that Barbara is studying.

Retired from her nursing career in New York, Barbara moved to St. Augustine last February to be closer to family. She's still getting to know her new community — where to shop, where to have her hair done, where to meet new people — but she doesn't drive.

She heard people at the Center talking about an alternative. Her voyage today on the Sunshine Bus sails past the county Government Center, where several young adults board. An interpreter from the workforce development office and a high school student are also on board. Barbara is observing and taking notes. She's learning about the monthly pass, the free transfers, the connection to the Jacksonville Transportation Authority. Even a discount for seniors. Beyond the Red Line, there's the Green, Blue, Orange and Purple lines for her to explore. She's sure her niece and nephew don't know about this, and she can't wait to tell them. The bus pulls up in front of the public library, and she's reminded of her to-do list.”

“I made some New Year's resolutions this year. I'm going to check out books from the library. I'm going to take a computer class. And I'm going to visit family more,” she an-

nounces. “That's why I need to know about this bus!”

Brown is expecting more people to make the same discovery. In April the Sunshine Bus began serving a new hub on US 1, where connections will include the new Route Connector — what Brown calls the new heart of the system — providing greater connectivity with the existing routes.

“We're expecting to double ridership in the next eighteen months with the addition of the US 1 circulator, which connects all six lines,” says Brown. “Our county is experiencing unprecedented growth, and the next five years will bring a 20 percent increase in population.”

When the city's new Visitor Information Center and parking facility is finished, the Sunshine Bus will be an important tourist connection to downtown destinations. The Council on Aging is even exploring possibilities for a new circulator in the downtown area.

The Council on Aging's mobility work has caught the attention of Congressman John Mica, representing Florida's 7th Congressional District, including St. Augustine. With an aging fleet and a transportation center lacking bus wash and maintenance facilities — not to mention a secure roof thanks to a string of storms — the Council faced challenges beyond growing demand. Congressman Mica secured federal investment for a new bus operations center, new vehicles and upgraded shelters.

Cultivating a Community Asset

Brown says the Sunshine Bus would never have been possible without the seed of the Transportation Disadvantaged Program that produced the Council on Aging's initial senior transportation service. From two vans connecting seniors to medical care to 44 vehicles connecting

a community with both demand-response and deviated fixed-route service, St. Johns County has a transportation system growing with its population's needs.

“We took our little senior piece, and we enlarged it to be a community asset,” says Brown of a mobility network garnering a great deal of good will among residents. “We have a very good vibration in the community.”

Although it's public transportation, the Sunshine Bus has been a welcome innovation in the senior community. A great number of seniors have become regular riders, especially for shopping trips. They like the flexibility of daily service and the convenience of not having to walk all the way to a designated stop.

“That's been a real bonus. It's helped us extend service for seniors,” says Brown.

The door-to-door service remains an important mobility choice for many seniors. The Coastal Community Center remains an essential destination. Crafts, exercise classes, parties, dances, good food. And Bingo.

“We really enjoy this. Everyday,” says Ella of the Center's central role in her and her friends' lives.

The women sharing a table in the dining all hail from Hastings, a small town 20 miles west of St. Augustine. Flora and Ella have been neighbors on the same street since 1950, and Fannie and Ruby live close by. Access to a convenient transportation choice, they all agree, enables them to continue living independently.

The three women turn to their friend Fannie, who has said little during the conversation. She nods her head and offers her summation. “It's a blessing.”



Streetcar operator James Michaels has a front row seat to the TECO Line's transformative power.

Connecting the Dots **Tampa's TECO Line Streetcar System**

Spanish entrepreneur Don Vicente Martinez Ybor relocated his cigar industry from Cuba to Key West in 1869, seeking the same temperate climate without the labor unrest. He not only encountered more workforce issues but an additional business obstacle — no reliable transportation. Martinez Ybor eventually settled in 1885 on 40 acres of bayside property in the Tampa area, where South Florida Railroad had arrived the year before, and the

Tampa Street Railway was emerging.

Immigrants from Sicily, Spain and Cuba — in search of work and a better life — soon followed. Ybor City was built to house them, and rapidly the small frontier town became a company town, known as the Cigar Capital of the World. At the industry's peak some 15,000 *tabaqueros* — cigar makers — cut and rolled for hundreds of factories, producing 700 million cigars a year, transforming both the economy and

culture. An electrified streetcar system would expand connections into the 20th Century, linking Tampa and Ybor City, and connecting communities over 53 miles of track to stores, parks and, of course, the cigar factories.

Today, streetcars are once again plying the streets of Ybor City. The TECO Streetcar System is a fine example of the unique response of transit systems in Florida to the needs of the communities they serve. Both the systems' ridership — it recently celebrated its millionth rider — and the economic development along the line it has engendered are testament to its success.

A cigar band logo pays homage to past connections on today's TECO Streetcar, while 2.4 miles of new track lead to future ones. James Michaels relocated from New Jersey to be part of Tampa's new mobility option operated by the Tampa region's public transit agency, Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority — better known as HARTline. In just few short years, he's watched the community transform through the windshield of the gleaming yellow and red streetcar he steers. Linking Tampa's downtown Convention Center with historic Ybor City along Channelside Drive, the trolley motorman points out not only landmark buildings and tourist attractions but new residential housing and the sites of proposed development.

"It's all because of the streetcar," he sums up. "Come back to visit soon, and you may not even recognize the place."

Indeed. The project's announcement was a magnet for development. According to the Tampa Downtown Partnership, more than \$800 million in new, privately funded projects are recently completed, newly approved, or under construction within two blocks of



The TECO Streetcar system is one element in a larger transportation network.

The TECO Line runs eight replica Birney cars, nearly identical in appearance to those running in the first half of the 20th Century.

the streetcar line since its inception. Convention attendees can connect to new hotels. Cruise ships dock in the city's port and visitors can connect to historic Ybor City. Neighbors in new residential buildings along Channelside Drive can connect to work and play at the city's new waterfront entertainment and shopping complex. The look and pace of Tampa is changing. Transformation was always part of the vision.

Two Visions; Single Track

Seeking to preserve its history, assemble its present-day assets and secure its future, the City of Tampa is banking on an old transportation idea with new connections

and plenty of possibilities. In the 1990s, city officials were focused on the future. To balance the area's suburban growth and reenergize the urban core, development efforts focused on three areas. On the west side, high-rise office buildings and a new convention center went up in downtown's central business district. To the east, a new hockey arena, aquarium and shopping and entertainment complex in Channel District, the docking point for visiting cruise ships. To the northeast, a plethora of eating and entertainment venues were sprouting in Ybor City. For Tampa, the whole could be more than the sum of its parts if easy connections linked the three evolving destinations.

Meanwhile, a handful of trolley enthusiasts were focused on the past. When an old streetcar from Tampa's early 20th Century system — No. 163 — was discovered in its present-day role as a piece of run-down rental property, the Tampa & Ybor City Street Railway Society swung into action. Purchasing the relic, the Society began a restoration project that members hoped would blossom into a rolling history museum, maintaining an important piece of Tampa's past.

Then-mayor Dick Greco, Tampa Electric Company's Tom Ruddell — who founded the Railway Society — and HARTline's then-executive director Sharon Dent saw a connection between the two visions and

HARTline became the conduit to channel both. A Tampa and Ybor connection could be reborn, but this time along a different alignment — one with greater opportunities for development and greater potential for riders.

“The visions started to merge — that of the people interested in historic preservation and that of the people interested in the economic revitalization of Tampa,” says Dent, remembering how a strategy began to take shape. “The streetcar could be a tool. I could see the value of it from a land-use perspective, and also as a step for the transit agency to move into the multimodal arena. We could broaden the range of products that the transit authority delivered, making transit more relevant to a broader community.”

The plan — a unique one with responsibilities shared among HARTline, the City and a nonprofit corporation — garnered federal and state investment, which was supplemented with local gas tax funds to lay the track, build the stations and buy vehicles. Next came the day-to-day machinations of the community’s new mobility mode. Farebox and advertising revenue were expected to raise one-third of the system’s operating budget. A new special property assessment district would cover another third. The final piece of the operations puzzle came in several pieces.

First, a private corporation was eager to be released from its city contract to operate an unsuccessful monorail, and bought its termination for \$5 million. After spending \$1 million to tear down the monorail, the City had \$4 million leftover. If invested, that money could grow and generate additional revenue. As public agencies, neither the City nor HARTline could take that action. But a new nonprofit corporation — formed to manage the operation

of the system, and a vital second piece — could. Tampa Historic Streetcar, Inc., garnered additional private-sector support by marketing naming rights — the third piece. Stations, vehicles, even individual seats on the trolleys could be sponsored to support the endowment fund. TECO Energy purchased the naming rights for the system, appropriate since the utility company had owned Tampa’s original streetcar system a century earlier.

Of course, it had been nearly 60 years since streetcars connected the Tampa area. There was no longer anyone around with experience in

running such a system. Some 10,000 miles away, however, there was.

Connectivity through Mobility

Tim Borchers remembers being mesmerized by streetcars at age 11. By age 16, he was ready to launch a career in rail, and submitted the winning bid for a maintenance contract in the City of Bendigo in his native Australia. He’s been working with “tramways” ever since. He eventually returned to Bendigo to manage the streetcar system. During a U.S. visit to explore American

HARTLine’s Borchers (left) says turn-of-the-century streetcar mobility can play an integral role in today’s modern transportation systems. Government Affairs Officer Ed Crawford is more succinct: “The trolley connects the dots.”



operations, Tampa stood out. The emerging trolley line was to run the same single-track dual-direction operation as the system he oversaw back in the Bendigo. His experience was the perfect fit.

"The Tampa route had so much potential," remembers Borchers. "It was also using a very old type of overhead system that hasn't been used for years and years, and there's really only two of these systems left in the English-speaking world — this one in America and the one I was managing in Bendigo. I had the expertise to manage the geography of the system, the track layout."

Borchers, hired as HARTLine's Superintendent of Streetcar Operations, also knew a thing or two about vehicles ordered for the Tampa line.

"The system I was managing had five Birneys. I'd been working on these cars since I was 16!"

The concept is old. The mobility is new. The TECO Line runs eight replica Birney cars, nearly identical in appearance to those running in the first half of the 20th Century. With a nod to history, the vehicles flaunt the same oak benches and hand-painted ceilings. With the embrace of modernity, each car includes an audio and digital display system, wheelchair positions, bicycle racks and factory-installed air-conditioning.

System planners predicted some 950 daily riders on the line. Since opening day, the TECO Line has averaged more than 1,200. Tourists currently make up a large portion of ridership, with more residents on the line Friday through Sunday. With a recent extension of evening operations, more people are expected to choose the streetcar connection to attractions at St. Pete Times Forum.

With all the fanfare surrounding Tampa's rail system, one cannot forget that the TECO Line Streetcar

system is an element in a larger transportation network for the community. Its zigzag track crosses five HARTline bus routes, including the free connector buses — painted yellow to match the streetcars — linking passengers to the central business district, Old Hyde Park and South Howard, known locally as "SoHo". The streetcar's fare card can be swiped on the other buses, making transfers easy. The line's current southwest terminus is the new Southern Transportation Plaza, an intermodal station providing connections to HARTline bus service, charter bus service and taxis. Streetcars enter this rail roundhouse diagonally, positioning themselves for their eventual continuation along proposed new track into downtown's central business district.

"Downtown Tampa is slowly but surely becoming a neighborhood," says Tampa Downtown Partnership's Director of Transportation and Planning Karen Kress, highlighting recent residential growth as more people choose an urban lifestyle. "We see the streetcar as integral to this choice, as a mobility option for residents, enabling them to move around."

Whatever It Takes Southwest Florida's Good Wheels

Pulling out of the Good Wheels facility driveway and turning onto Treeline Avenue, drivers expertly navigate a road in transition. Until recently, the view out the driver-side windows included acres of, well, trees — hence, the street name. It now consists of plowed dirt and heavy equipment as new construc-

tion proceeds at a rapid pace. Nearby, a new, larger airport will replace one the community has outgrown. There's a new shopping mall in the works, and countless residential developments. It's a scene playing throughout southwest Florida, as population growth — fueled by tourism, retirement, part-time residency and an economy supported by resort, construction and farm workers — transforms the region's landscape, travel patterns and mobility needs.

"Changes! They're hard to keep up with!" says Good Wheels Road Supervisor Leonard Hamilton. "So many new streets. So much new development. Everybody's coming to Florida."

Or it sure seems that way, he says. The area's population grew by almost 20 percent between 2000 and 2004. The last U.S. census estimates that 21,000 people move to Lee County annually, making it among the fastest growing in the nation. In winter months, the region's population expands over 20 percent.

A changing community requires a responsive transportation system. Throughout the Sunshine State, community and public transportation systems have pro-actively responded to meet the dynamic needs of all citizens. In the Fort Myers area, Good Wheels, Inc., has transformed itself over the past seven years — evaluating needs, assessing resources, restructuring operations, building relationships, expanding services and redefining community transportation in southwest Florida.

Miles and Milestones

It's not quite 7:00 a.m., and driver Jim Cross — donning the eye-catching floral-print shirt that is a Good Wheels' trademark — is removing the early morning dew from his vehicle's windshield with a squeegee as he prepares to start his day. Good Wheels connections started much earlier today, when a vehicle



Good Wheels: Driver Robert Fulton (left) is someone passenger Joe knows he can depend on.

departed at 4:00 a.m., for a medical appointment more than 100 miles away in Clearwater.

Checking his roster, Cross says it will be a low-mileage day — about 150, he estimates. He's headed to the Senior Friendship Center this morning, where he's been taking Mildred for three years. The 81-year-old woman lives with her daughter but looks forward to rides with Cross four days a week. She always takes her seat directly behind her driver so they can easily chat.

"Their face just lights up when I arrive," says Cross of his many senior passengers. "They're looking forward to the ride. I'll let them know that I've got somebody else to pick up, and they'll say, 'Oh, that's OK. Drive as long as you want to.'"

Cross' is one of three vehicles headed to Senior Friendship this morning, where a heated card game is already underway. Peggy, Flo, Mary and Joan are rapidly shuffling and slapping cards, seemingly oblivious to anyone around them. Phyllis

prefers to watch from the sidelines.

"This is a wonderful place," she says. "My son used to bring me, but it's a long drive, and with the price of gas?!"

The ride, she adds, is comfortable and easy. And she has a very good driver. But it's the destination — the "getting here" — that makes all the difference in her life.

"People really depend on that bus," says Ruthann Swiatek, Senior Adult Day Care Manager at the Center, highlighting the connection's importance for not only senior participants but their families.

The Center, she explains, eliminates isolation and offers a change of environment, an opportunity for social stimulation. It also offers a safer environment — with medical assistance always available — and reliability that's crucial to caregivers, the majority of whom are juggling work and other responsibilities.

The same Good Wheels drivers cover the same daily routes that connect passengers to the Center.

Driver Jim Cross, for instance, steers his vehicle on the "south route" to and from South Fort Myers. Swiatek emphasizes the importance of that regularity for senior participants and their families.

"Whenever you're dealing with people who have any kind of memory problem — and about 95 percent of our folks do — consistency is the most important thing. Their driver knows where they live, the easiest way to get there, recognizes family members, knows if they need to go to the door or not, if they need to unlock the door or not, if the client has a key or not — all those details. When the same person is providing service over and over, it makes for a very easy situation," says Swiatek.

That valuable dependability is an uppermost priority for Good Wheels. The organization has built over the last seven years a firm mobility foundation with a sensible financial plan, an effective operations strategy and an ardent commitment to community relation-

ships. Its efforts have been shaping a new identity.

In 1999, the agency's service needed some new direction. Gary Bryant, retired from the active-duty Army and overseeing high school ROTC programs in Lee County, had joined the Good Wheels Board two years earlier at the invitation of its Chair, General James Dozier. Becoming first familiar with and then committed to the organization's mission, Bryant decided he could steer Good Wheels in a better direction.

"Once an organization develops its strategic plan, then you have a roadmap, and you need to figure out how to get to where you need to go. That's where leadership, management and organizational skills come in," says General Dozier, underscoring essential changes for Good Wheels. "You can motivate people to do great things if you have good leadership and a good roadmap."

Bryant brought both to the company in May 1999, resigning from

Good Wheel's potential in Glades, Hendry and Lee counties. Operations, public relations, fundraising and financial management were all redirected by individuals Bryant considered to be some of the region's best and brightest. The dramatic changes were supported by an involved board of directors — whose membership, lauds Bryant, reads like a Who's Who of community leaders.

Making a Significant Difference

Good Wheels was crafting a transportation network to better meet the community's mobility needs. Getting behind the wheel was only part of the strategy. Bryant made a campaign of building personal relationships with agencies, passengers and community leaders.

"I wanted to assure them that not only were we a quality organization able to perform at a quality level, but we were a professionally man-

fixed-route service — 17 bus lines providing nearly 2.8 million rides. The expansive, rural and sparsely populated inland counties — Glades and Hendry — present different challenges.

Looking at a map of Florida, the heavy ink of development diminishes in the state's south-central region. There are a minimal number of thoroughfares in rural Hendry and Glades counties due east of Fort Myers, with the bulk of the land occupied by citrus groves, cattle pastures and produce farms that attract seasonal workers. The population is small and dispersed. Nonetheless, both counties — like their coastal neighbor — are experiencing tremendous growth, some 40 percent in the 1990s.

With limited services available in the county seats of Moore Haven and LaBelle, many passengers seek connections to Fort Myers on the coast — a 60 or 120-mile round trip. In 2001, Good Wheels was providing demand-response service for numerous agencies, but there was no dedicated service for the general public.

To better assess the needs of and options for inland residents, Good Wheels sought guidance from the Community Transportation Association of America. Selected competitively through the Rural Passenger Transportation Technical Assistance Program, Good Wheels needed answers to two questions: 1) Did transportation demand in Glades and Hendry counties dictate a regularly scheduled, intercity fixed-route connecting to Fort Myers?; and 2) How could Good Wheels pay for it?

Using demographic data, transit needs models and input from area agencies, officials and employers, Community Transportation Association of America research found unmet transit need in both counties.

"Good Wheels had the infrastructure, personnel and existing presence

By complimenting what they were already doing in Hendry and Glades, the general public service was a natural progression.

the Board to become President and CEO. He immediately got to work.

"In order to talk with someone about supporting your organization, you've got to be providing a quality service that they would be willing to support," says Bryant, ticking off timeliness, courteousness and safety. "The first thing I did, literally, was get our operations department performing at a level that would satisfy the community, so I could then ask for more support."

He didn't do it alone. Bryant brought in other members of the community equally dedicated to

aged company dedicated to serving the needs of this community for the long haul."

Good Wheels' continued in its provider role. As a partial brokerage, the company contracts for service with various agencies, nonprofits and taxi companies, and also provides trips itself. And as the system has prospered, it has added the responsibility of serving additional communities.

Coastal Lee County is connected in a transportation network that combines Good Wheel's rides with small-urban provider LeeTran's

in the community to take on expanded service,” says the Association’s Kelly Shawn, explaining his recommendations. “By complimenting what they were already doing in Hendry and Glades, the general public service was a natural progression.”

Good Wheels spread the word, running public service announcements on local radio and TV stations, placing ads in the local newspapers, posting notices in human service agency offices and filtering the news through the Local Coordinated Board. With new investment dollars through the federal rural transportation program, Good Wheels began its new general public service in January 2005.

“Glades and Hendry are the smallest counties in Southwest Florida. Their combined population makes up less than four percent of the region’s total,” explains Shawn. “It was understood that service expansion would have a relatively small impact in addressing area-wide planning goals — smart growth, workforce development and economic competitiveness, moving visitors and freight — but that it would make a significant difference in the lives of Glades and Hendry residents.”

Glades and Hendry are two counties in the state identified by the Florida Legislature as “economically stressed.”

“These are places where the demographics indicate high rates of poverty and unemployment and tremendous transportation need,”



Dedicated to their mission, President/CEO Gary Bryant and his staff focus on strong partnerships, financial stability and high-quality service.

explains Richard Shine, project manager with the Florida Department of Transportation’s District 1.

He also underscores the financial challenges that rural public transit operators face — fuel, insurance, and long distances to traverse.

“The community process at work — the study, the community meetings, the outreach to stakeholder — involved good public information and a very good community involvement process,” he says. “The foundation, the framework, the structure is there. The good groundwork holds great potential for the future.”

Steadfast Connections

Making a difference in so many lives, today’s Good Wheels provides an average of nearly 19,000 passenger trips a month. The organization’s connections include charter service for special trips and 35 school bus routes for area charter schools. With its expansive transportation

coordination network, 69 drivers on 50 vehicles cover 1.6 million miles. All dependable connections that the community can count on.

“There’s no doubt in anyone’s mind about what Good Wheels is trying to do and how they’re trying to do,” says Board member General Dozier of the organization’s place in the community.

Bryant says the organization will continue to meet challenges with new and strengthened partnerships. That crucial synergy, he stresses, will enable Good Wheels to evolve alongside a dynamic Southwest Florida.

“Whatever it takes,” says Bryant, delivering a motto adopted in the military. “We have a strong desire not to fail. When you’re assigned a mission, you accomplish that mission. No matter how hard you have to work or what it takes to get it done. We’ve adopted the same slogan here. Failure is not an option.”

Mile Marker Mobility

Monroe County Transit, Middle Keys Transportation & Key West Transit

Driving south of the Miami metropolitan area and crossing the *18-Mile Stretch* that leaves the mainland along lone Highway 1, you begin to understand the overarching logistical challenge of the Keys. One road in. One road out. The chain of low-lying islands stretch over 120 miles from Key West to the mainland. No point is more than four miles from water. With the population sprinkled all along the narrow expanse, there is no typical urban or rural area. Destinations are most often identified by their distance from US 1's southern terminus. In a community delineated by mile-marker guideposts, connections are fundamental.

The unusual geography doesn't lend itself to an obvious, centrally located county seat. Rather, the County divides the Keys into three regions — the Lower Keys, the Middle Keys and the Upper Keys — and provides county offices and services in triplicate along the length of the archipelago. Even with this provision, travel distances are great for many. The three county hospitals, for example, are 45 miles apart. The mobility barriers are greatest for the elderly and disabled, which make up nearly a quarter of the Keys' population.

Helping residents and visitors navigate the mobility challenges of the Keys are Monroe County Transit, Middle Keys Transportation and Key West Transit — working together to make connections in, around, across and even out of the three regions of islands. A combination of fixed-route and demand-response services, various investment dollars and a network of service areas improve access to vital medical care, employment op-



Key West Transit provides the region's only fixed route public transit system. Recently, it has added commuter service from the Middle Keys.

portunities, senior activities and even safe shelter — through evacuation plans — in a region of rapidly shifting demographics, housing, services and weather.

Nearly a century ago, Henry Morrison Flagler understood that the construction of a rail line connecting the Keys to the mainland would be one of the most stupendous engineering feats of its day, and would have a transformative effect on the island communities. Today's community and public transportation

network is the natural progression of Flagler's spectacular achievement and is no less vital to those living and working in the Keys.

Anyone Who Wants to Ride

Alice Ann boards the Monroe County Transit vehicle with driver Randy Porquett's assistance. After surgery four years ago, she began using a wheelchair, and had concerns about mobility options. When some friends confirmed the transit service availability she first noticed through

a newspaper ad, she made the call. Now the Monroe County bus picks her up two or three times a week.

“I’ve been going to the hospital for treatment for three years now,” explains Alice Ann, who moved to the Keys from Virginia 20 years ago. “My son could take me, but I hate to interrupt his work. This is so much easier.”

Making connections within each of the Keys’ three regions, Monroe County Transit’s 15 vehicles and 9 drivers provide door-to-door, demand-response service. Its connections are available to anyone in the county.

“We’re an open eligibility service,” explains Monroe County Transit Director Jerry Eskew. “That means we’ll take anyone. Anyone who wants to ride our bus for any purpose.”

Last year the system provided 40,000 trips with a \$2.1 million budget, much of which emanates from the county itself.

“This service is something the County provides that I’m very proud of,” says County Commissioner George Neugent. “For those who for any reason need transportation, our drivers go door to door to bring our residents to the doctor’s, the grocery store or wherever they need to go and can’t because of a lack of transportation.”

The county’s logistical challenges, he explains, require a web of mobility options. Assessing those needs and services, the Local Coordinating Board — on which Neugent sits — uses input from passengers, human service agencies, government officials and transportation providers to guide coordinated decisions that address the Keys’ unique landscape.

Bridging Distance and Gaps

Middle Keys Transportation provides an additional layer of connections in the region’s mobility network, providing links between communities to supplement those within communities. Complimenting Monroe County Transit’s three service areas, Middle Keys Transportation offers service between them, with routes that run the length of the Keys. If a passenger in Key Largo needs to go to Tavernier, 10 miles south but still in the Upper Keys, MCT provides the ride. If they need to go to Marathon, 50 miles south in the Middle Keys, Middle Keys Transportation is the link.

The Guidance Clinic of the Middle Keys — a private nonprofit offering behavioral healthcare services — has operated Middle Keys Transportation for over 20 years, making vital links to services for clients. The Guidance Clinic is both

coordinator — contracting with area transportation providers, such as the Florida Keys Homeless Outreach Coalition, the Children’s Shelter, AIDS Help, Center for Independent Living and local taxi companies — and provider. Middle Keys Transportation connects clients of human service agencies, providing non-emergency medical transportation and linking anyone who needs a ride — to the doctor’s office, to work, to the classroom, to the grocery store. To anywhere they need to go.

Seven vans and two full-time and three part-time drivers operate weekdays between the City of Marathon — situated in the middle of the Keys — and the Lower Keys, and between Marathon and the Upper Keys. While non-emergency medical transportation is offered door-to-door, all other trips are made on Middle Keys Transportation’s routes along US 1, with rides scheduled in advance and passengers picked up at designated stops — Dion’s Quick Mart, Peacock Apartments, Waterfront Market, Islamorada Library, San Pedro’s Church and others.

Consistent stops on one road simplify trip planning, but the lack of alternate thoroughfares can complicate trip schedules and increase costs. Middle Keys Transportation Director Maureen Grynewicz recalls instances where US 1 was blocked

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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Passengers and purchases home safely. With assistance from driver Randy Porquett (right), Richard decides his first Monroe County Transit experience is, “a heck of a deal.”

for 24 hours or longer. On top of the possibility that their destination might not have been reached, passengers on Middle Keys Transportation vehicles — some distance from home — might require overnight stays and medication.

Access to specialized medical service in the Keys is especially challenging. In the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane season, the dialysis treatment center in Key West, at Monroe County's southern tip, has only recently reopened, though not at full capacity. The next nearest facility lies in Homestead on the mainland, 130 miles away. Some specialized care requires travel to Miami, another 35 miles.

The Keys are an expensive place to operate, and some specialty healthcare services simply can't afford to locate in the islands. Additionally, their needed workforce may be unable to secure affordable

housing. There is no shortage of challenges.

“The economics here are just so tough,” comments Grynewicz. “Limited facilities is already an issue. The issue coming up is the length of the trip, in terms of the time duration. We're going to have to multi-load passengers that may have appointments scheduled further apart in time.”

To ameliorate the expense of long-distance rides, Middle Keys Transportation coordinates trips, placing as many passengers as possible on the same vehicle. The Guidance Clinic has adopted other cost-saving measures, such as a monthly bus passes on Key West Transit for passengers in the City. More recent commuter service — with Miami-Dade Transit between Homestead and Marathon and with Key West Transit between Key West and Marathon — will offer future partnerships.

Southernmost Points

As a small island, the City of Key West's cartographic footprint is not overwhelming. But distance and geography are significant challenges being met by Key West Transit, too.

Operating in a city that holds 40 percent of the county's population, Key West Transit provides the region's only fixed-route public transit system, making 320,000 trips annually. Part of the Key West Department of Transportation family of services, the system includes a fleet of 15 vehicles running on six fixed routes that circle and cross six square miles.

The price of housing in Key West has caused a growing exodus out of the city (and in some cases, out of the county). Many residents with ties to work and school in Key West have relocated 50 miles north to Marathon.

“It's become the accepted norm,” says Key West Transit Manager Myra Hernandez. “Now they commute daily.”

This commute just got easier with the start last September of the Lower Keys Shuttle. The result of a tri-party agreement between the City of Key West the City of Marathon and the County, the line enabled 15,000 passenger trips in the first three months of operations. And demand is growing every week.

The Shuttle connects in Marathon with the Dade-Monroe Express, which is part of the Miami-Dade Transit system and operated by Julia Garcia Transit. It travels the 75 miles between Marathon and Homestead, creating a regional connection. With the state's highest cost of living found in Monroe County, many of the Keys' workers are commuting from residences in Miami-Dade County.

Riders traveling south on the Shuttle can connect with all six Key West Transit routes in the Sears Town shopping center. From there,

Last Train to Paradise

Les Standiford

Crown Publishers, 2002

Reviewed by Beth Wilson

At the dawn of the 20th Century, America had few frontiers left to shape. And not many would have recognized the capricious waters between Miami and Havana as an opportunity. Yet one man brought together vision, wealth, brilliance and resolve in the country's southernmost parts to shape his own manifest destiny. Author Les Standiford offers readers a glimpse into the genius of Henry Morrison Flagler, and a ride on his spectacular journey to build an impossible railroad.

By age 74, Flagler's life had already left an indelible mark on the American landscape. His partnership with J.D. Rockefeller produced one of the most profitable and powerful corporations in history — Standard Oil. His later career in hotel building and, what he saw as its valuable compliment, passenger rail, forever changed the state of Florida. But Flagler saw one last triumph on the horizon, and was determined to connect Key West with the mainland during his remaining years. Extending his Florida East Coast Railway more than 150 miles across open ocean was deemed not only folly by some, but fantasy. Flagler and an intrepid group of engineers and laborers would prove otherwise. Eventually.

Construction of the extension was not only one of the greatest engineering feats ever undertaken; it was the most dogged of projects, spanning seven years in the face of unpredictable terrain, heat, humid-

ity, insects, federal investigations, isolation, exhaustion, heat stroke and disease. And alligators.

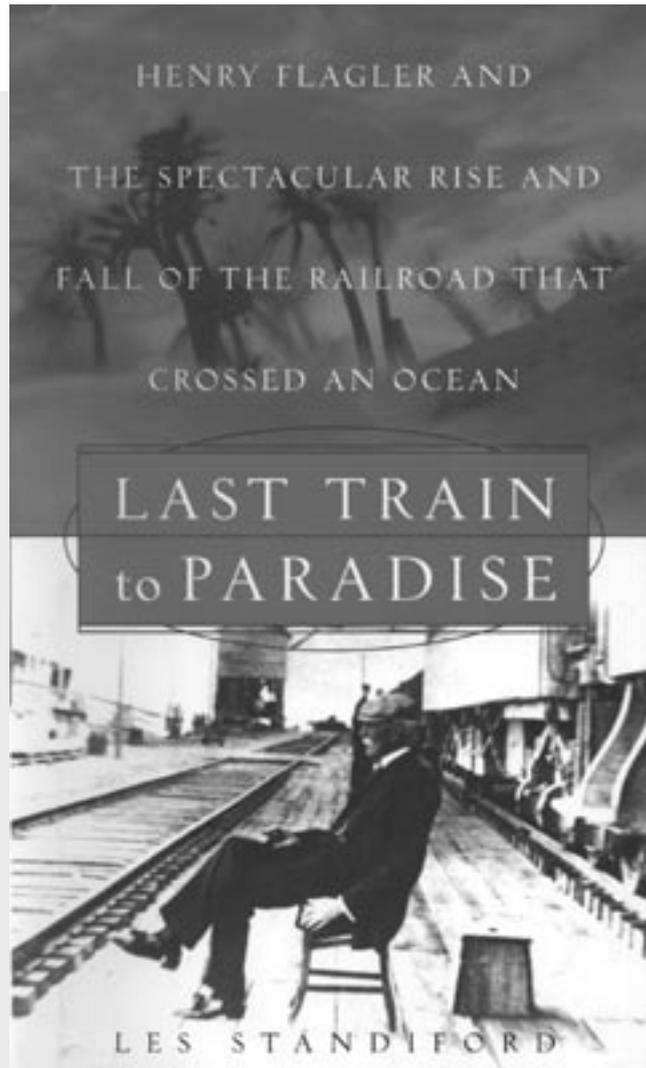
Ironically, the innovative engineering strategies that moved the project forward also became its nemesis. Some of the tactics used — such as quarrying the Umbrella Keys for limestone and coral to use as fill — would today be prohibited by environmental standards. Back then, they came to be forbidden by Mother Nature herself. By fundamentally altering the region's geographic footprint through dredging and filling, the natural movement of massive waves typical in the storm-ridden region was interrupted, with disastrous results. Each of the three hurricanes that hit the region during the rail line's construction offered

Flagler and his men vital lessons learned.

Though the setbacks were many, the fervor grew. No doubt Flagler took strength from the enthusiasm that met the rail line as it proceeded. Passenger rail was eagerly awaited by the small communities that stretched along the Keys. Its arrival, they understood, would transform their future.

Standiford's gripping prose masterfully captures the spirit of the man and his remarkable feat against what should have been insurmountable odds, and, as history and nature would one day prove, were.

Last Train to Paradise can be ordered online through a variety of booksellers, including www.amazon.com.



Louis can direct them. Because if you're trying to get anywhere in the City of Key West, Louis will tell you which bus to take. Probably who's driving the bus, too. An employee at a local supermarket, he sees the Key West Transit buses pull in and out of the busy shopping center all day. Green, Orange, Purple, Blue, Red, Gold — vehicles from every line pull up to the bus stop in front of the store, and load up with workers, shoppers, visitors, students, seniors and military personnel.

18 Feet Above Sea Level

Daily connections are an essential part of any community. In a region with a designated and anticipated hurricane season, the mobility network must also include emergency response service.

2005 was a record-breaking year for storms in the Keys. Four major hurricanes — three of them reaching Category Five status — hit the region, which at its highest point is only 18 feet above sea level. The great potential for flooding necessitates a pre-planned, coordinated evacuation. While the exit of private automobiles along US 1 is managed through staggered departures and one-way traffic, many individuals are dependent on transit options.

Key West Transit begins its evacuation process when the voluntary evacuation order is issued by the County's Emergency Operations Center. Hernandez says timing is a challenge. By the time the Center delivers a mandatory residential evacuation order, the transit provider has time for only one trip per bus and driver out of the county. So instead, all 15 of Key West Transit's buses roll into action with the initial voluntary announcement. That usually offers the provider another 24 hours to act.

"Using this strategy last year, we were able to get two trips out prior

We're all there to work together to provide the best service without duplicating service, and to close the gaps where we see that service isn't meeting need.

to pulling our buses off the road," says Hernandez, noting the greater volume of people that can be moved to safety.

Key West Transit begins with announcements by radio and TV, and communication with homeless shelters and rehabilitative facilities, directing people to the three staging areas in the city. From there, drivers steer them to the designated Monroe County shelter at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami. As an additional evacuation strategy in 2005, Key West Transit worked with county fire departments to set up additional staging sites at fire stations between Key West and Marathon.

"We go really hard with public service announcements. Once you shift to emergency management/hurricane mode, all regular bus service is cancelled until further notice. The resources have left town — hopefully full of people — and aren't coming back until it's safe," says Hernandez, stressing the crucial public awareness. "That's really important for people to understand. If they have any notion that you might be running a bus locally to get them around to do what they want to do up until the 11th hour, then they're going to wait. If they know the last bus is leaving at 10 o'clock on Tuesday morning, and that's their last chance to get out of here, then they'll go."

Individuals with special needs — the elderly, frail, disabled — can choose to leave the area on rides organized by Monroe County Transit, and be relocated to the special needs shelter at Miami's Florida International University. Monroe County Transit identifies vulnerable

segments of the population through outreach efforts in the community throughout the year, and encourages their enrollment — along with their pets — in the Special Needs Registry. A pet-friendly sheltering program aims to encourage evacuation for those pet owners that have previously been reluctant to leave without their companions.

"Monroe County staff is involved in contacting the clients to arrange for their pick up so they have a familiar voice on the phone," explains Special Needs Coordinator Anna Haskins. "Many of the clients use this service on a daily basis for their routine errands, and are therefore very comfortable with their regular drivers in a time of emergency. They feel more secure knowing the way that the buses operate and knowing the operators themselves."

"We know our drivers. We can count on all of them going up there. Some will even come back to pick up another load," adds Eskew. "We trust our drivers. We know they'll ask the right questions. It's the most effective and least harsh method for clients."

Approximately 400 individuals register each year, and 50-100 may request evacuation assistance in any given emergency. Depending on seating configurations, Monroe County can accommodate 20-48 wheelchairs. If evacuation needs are larger, Eskew stresses the system's vital coordination with the County School Board and its school buses, using staging areas at several high schools. Providing a ride to safety for everyone that needs one, he says, requires a more expansive strategy.

"We've learned something," he says. "There are people who don't leave and get caught because they



Ridership has been steadily increasing as Key West Transit connects its six-square-mile service area.

don't have the money or the means."

Once a storm has passed, transit's role continues, now helping individuals return home. In addition to providing more connections, The system ensures that each client has a support system in place when they return, and calls those clients who chose not to evacuate to assess their needs. If an individual's home is deemed unsafe for return, Monroe County will provide transport to a staging area for further assistance in placement, and will ultimately connect passengers with their new destination.

A Mobile Community

The Keys' population is on the move — not just day-to-day connections but major relocations. The Local Coordinating Board brings together all three transit providers with other stakeholders to identify challenges and address changing needs.

"We're all there to work together

to provide the best service without duplicating service, and to close the gaps where we see that service isn't meeting need," says Hernandez.

As housing costs continue to rise, Neugent says two forces are in play. Many long-term residents owning real estate worth many times the price they once paid are choosing to cash out. Another wave moving out of the county includes the population who can no longer afford the cost of living, who are being forced out.

"These are changing demographics that will change our transportation needs in the future," says Neugent.

Eskew and Grynewicz concur, highlighting decreasing demand for their transportation services.

"Some of the people that may have been using the service have moved out," explains Eskew. "There's a different mix of people here now."

Neugent emphasizes that lower

demand does not diminish the importance of the need that exists. The connections provided by Monroe County Transit, Middle Keys Transportation and Key West Transit will continue to strengthen any network of services that evolves alongside the Keys community.

"The people who are using these services truly appreciate and have a need for it," underscores Neugent. "For those who don't have a ride, for whatever reason, we are there."