

effective communication taps essential resources

By Martha M. Rose



Island Transit began providing fare-free fixed-route service for the Puget Sound communities of Whidbey and Camano islands on December 1, 1987, and on that day carried a total of 161 passengers using four 30-foot buses. A Comprehensive Public Transit Plan prepared by consultants that year estimated that after delivering five years of service, the system could be considered very successful if ridership reached 500 passengers per day. By the middle of March 1988 — just three months later — the daily total was averaging 710 riders per day, and the immediate success of the system was apparent. By the summer of 1989, the average daily ridership totaled 1,100. Over the next three years, it grew to 2,000, all on the same four 30-foot buses!

Today, Island Transit carries over one million riders every year, providing fixed-route, route-deviation, paratransit and vanpool services. We remain true to our mission — to provide a package of ride-sharing services that emphasizes rider use, safety and satisfaction, and results in increased mobility opportunities, less dependence on the automobile, decreased traffic congestion,

role in the community.

Counting on Your Resources

The state of Washington has been challenged by voter-driven tax cutting. In 1998, Initiative 690 was circulating for signatures to place an issue on the November ballot to eliminate a substantial vehicle licensing fee, the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax — more commonly referred to as MVET. There were not enough signatures gathered in time to place the issue on the ballot.

This attempted MVET revolt caused me to tremble in my tracks! We had a lot at stake. Washington provides, by statute, the authority and ability for local areas within the state to vote on whether or not they wish to increase local sales tax to support and fund public transportation services in their particular area. Prior to 1999, if a sales tax measure to fund transit were to pass by a simple majority during a local election, then the state would match the local sales tax collected to provide additional support for their public transportation service delivery. That matching support came from the MVET pot of funding. For most systems, the excise tax portion of a transit system's annual operating budget ranged in the area of 45-50 percent. For Island Transit, it represented 60 percent of our annual operating budget.

When the 1998 initiative failed to gather the required number of signatures, I knew the issue would resurface the following year. Not only did it resurface, the signatures were gathered, the issue was placed on the November 1999 ballot, and the initiative passed! In one fell swoop, Island Transit lost 60 percent of our dedicated funding source.

We had lost an enormous resource. But we still had an even greater one: our community. We launched an all-hands-on-deck communications effort, and rallied our advocates. This was no time for modesty. We knew that being the best-kept secret in the community was no strategy for success.



Martha Rose, her husband Bob and daughter Tai.

and improved air quality for all people in the service area, riders and non-riders alike — and our system's strength has come from effectively communicating this



Communications Overcomes a Crisis

Island Transit held more than 100 public meetings in 1999 and 2000. These community gatherings — often organized in conjunction with our Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) — were held at various locations throughout Island County: senior centers, fire halls, community centers, progressive halls, libraries, schools, college campuses and church facilities. We used the forums to educate community members about Island Transit's service, its impact on the economy, congestion and quality of life, and the current funding crisis we faced. We presented an alternate strategy to maintain mobility in Island County: a measure to increase the local sales tax for Island Transit.

We put the word out about these meetings through *Rider Alerts* on our buses and shelters, our website, and through display ads and community notices in our local newspapers. The true brunt of the work, however, was done by a great many interested local citizens. We learned that the most powerful communication is delivered by those impacted by transit. It's one thing for a system manager to espouse the virtues of community and public transportation; it's quite another when the message comes from ordinary citizens.

Make that extraordinary citizens. Several people got together and formed a group called S.O.S., Save Our System, Citizens for Island Transit. The members of S.O.S. attended many of the community meetings. They began a passionate write-in campaign to our local newspapers that stimulated quite a debate. They attended Island Transit Board Meetings. And, perhaps most-importantly, they started a petition drive. Within just three days they collected over 3,500 signatures on a petition that was presented to the Island Transit Board of Directors, imploring them to place the sales tax issue on the ballot. The Board Meeting room was jam-packed, with people spilling out into the hallways.

On May 16, 2000, a measure was on the ballot in Island County asking voters if they wanted to increase sales tax to support Island Transit services. The voters responded with their support. Though this was the third ballot measure in Island County to pass in support of Island Transit services (North Whidbey Island in 1992 and Camano Island in 1995 passed sales tax increases by an overwhelming 73 percent), the financial crisis we faced made this vote the most critical to our overall survival as an effective and efficient public transportation service provider.

Building a Message that Works

Behind our success at the ballot box was years of

Charging Forward: Lessons Learned

Any transit system's strength comes from its most powerful asset: its community. Make sure everyone — riders and non-riders alike — understand transit's role in their quality of life.

- The most powerful message is delivered by those impacted by transit
- It's one thing for a transit manager to espouse the virtues of mobility, it's quite another when the message comes from citizens.
- Behind our success at the ballot box was years of honing our communications skills.

honing our communications skills. All of our employees, the members of the Citizens Advisory Committee and the Island Transit Board of Directors have developed a working relationship and partnership with our community at large. We have excellent working partnerships with all of the local jurisdictions and agencies in Island County, as well as with the area Chambers of Commerce, and area businesses. We have also entered into a cooperative agreement between Island Transit and the private sector airport shuttle public transportation providers in our county for the joint use of transit facilities to create more conveniences for the public, which in turn promotes the use of alternatives to the automobile and better serves the needs of our citizens and visitors to the area. Island Transit participates on a number of committees for the various human service providers in Island County who meet regularly to discuss and round-table ideas to better serve residents' present and future needs.

We have worked hard together and are very proud of the fact that we have earned a reputation as dependable, efficient, effective, dedicated and sincere public transportation service providers. That achievement comes through always listening to the needs and demands of our communities. We hold public input meetings on a regular basis, and since starting service in 1987 have not failed once to respond to any letter or e-mail that has come into our offices, regardless of the content or subject matter.

If we are to continue to be successful in our mission, we must continue to promote the use of our services, and continue to educate the public about the benefits of using public transportation — both for those who directly use the system and for those who do not. And we must continue to partner with all members of our community in order to build upon strategies, objectives and goals for the future. Our ability to effectively communicate brought us through a difficult time and will continue to play a central role in our future success. 🚌

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