

Entrepreneurial Transit Development

Goodman combines transit and community development to ensure success

by Scott Bogren

There are entrepreneurs in every sector of the American economy -- including places where you'd least expect to find them, like in government or education... or community transportation.

Barry Goodman, president of the Goodman Corporation, headquartered in Houston, Texas, is a community transportation entrepreneur. He's spent the past 25 years dreaming up and then building innovative transit concepts as tools to rebuild cities and towns. It's a process he's come to love.

"We've been blessed to have the opportunity to help so many communities make real progress," said Goodman in a recent conversation we had while he was in Washington, D.C., working on several projects on Capitol Hill.

With a vibrant persona and engaging smile, Goodman is sharp, insightful and quick-to-the-point. He clearly enjoys talking transit, peppering his conversation with names of members of Congress; past, present and probably future leaders at the Federal Transit Administration (where he once worked); and well-known city mayors. Yes, he's connected.

His is a job that requires many skills. Goodman, to do his job successfully, must be a financial wizard, federal regulations expert, city planner, shrewd negotiator, tireless salesman and political insider. His experience with FTA (then UMTA) and the Houston MTA, where Goodman was general manager, come into play regularly; as do the lessons he learned as a child actor on the I Love Lucy Show .

It's not surprise that the Goodman Corp. is not a traditional consulting firm. Goodman and the staff of 14 immerse themselves in the community, becoming connected with all of the local players; learning where the minefields lie. He does this, he says, to forge credibility and, eventually, success.

"For each of our projects, there's so many naysayers," he smiles. " There's just no way to succeed except to become part of the community. It's an awesome responsibility."

Transit: The Ultimate Development Tool

Generally, one doesn't call the Goodman Corporation to finance a couple of vehicles. They operate on a larger scale, reviving entire neighborhoods or even communities through transit development.

Goodman has worked in major cities like Houston, Oklahoma City, Charlotte, Galveston, Palm Desert and Little Rock and suburban areas like The Woodlands, Texas. He's not so much interested in size, however, as he is possibilities and opportunities.

"We specialize in getting projects done in a framework that most operators are unaware of," explains Goodman.

There are plenty of consulting firms in the transit industry that can work up a planning document or an environmental study, but few immerse themselves more totally than Goodman's.

He and his staff use transit to bring about community development -- always. He sees no need to simply create a transit component, whether it be rail or bus, in a vacuum. In fact, he points to a lack of community development around the planning of some transit projects as the reason they eventually fail.

"To build any sort of transit line today and then hope for community development or re-development to occur is wasteful," he points out. "Why not just get the development work done up front? It takes the risk out of transit."

According to Goodman, transit can create local revenue and be an economic boon, rather than a drain. He claims this has been the case ever since the federal government took over public and community transportation in the early 1960s. It just takes the right set of people and circumstances to put it all together.

Two principle failures, says Goodman, have led to many of transit's real and perceived problems today -- and its generally poor image.

"The dearth of successful marketing of mass transit as an industry has led the American public to only consider one option: the car," he says ruefully. "So too many people fail to see the positive aspects of transit and its potential in the community."

"Public transit also has a real problem with accountability," notes Goodman. "What other public service has been steadfastly unwilling to be measured by any set of standards?"

What Goodman Looks For

Before taking on any project, Goodman and his staff look at two key factors: (1) Is it a worthwhile project? and (2) Can a local consensus be created?

The public benefit of any work is critical to Goodman and goes to the heart of his first question about a project. Concepts like retail retention, downtown revitalization and community development are the key indicators of worth.

To build local consensus, according to Goodman, one has to have public and private support.

"There are two real reasons why communities of any size fail," reveals Goodman. "A lack of leadership and a lack of private sector initiation."

Still, Goodman maintains an upbeat attitude about community transit. For example, he doesn't see how anyone in the transit field can site lack of funding anymore, particularly those willing to look into non-traditional, innovative sources.

"I do not believe that availability of funds is an issue," he says matter-of-factly. "There is tons of money out there for transit. Tons."

The Woodlands Town Center

One of Goodman's more inspired -- and ambitious -- projects is underway at The Woodlands, Texas, a suburban community north of Houston. The Woodlands Town Center Pedestrian and Transit Corridor brings together transit and community development in a seamless concept that is well underway. It also turns a drainage ditch into a development tool.

The project, a 2.36-mile transit line connecting a lake, regional mall, concert pavilion, park, community center, library and residential development with extensive business and retail space (see cover artwork), is beginning its third and final phase of construction. And rural transit funding helped launch this transit corridor.

"The Woodlands started out with a Section 18 [5311] grant," recalls Goodman. "We think that this project will show just how much early integration of transit can save future congestion and infrastructure costs."

The project's key feature is that the transit infrastructure is being built before development, not as an afterthought which creates difficult decisions about how to fit transit into limited space.

Currently, the Brazos Transit District (headquartered in Bryan, Texas) is operating several major services in the area. The waterway corridor will initially be served by shuttle buses but other forms of transportation, such as rail and even boats, will be considered as ridership grows, as expected. By 2005, plans call for a seven-station transit system to operate along the corridor's transitway, with ridership in excess of 8 million trips annually.

The Woodlands Town Center transit corridor will begin construction in April and is scheduled to become operational by the fall of 2000. With recent approval of an additional \$3.8 million of Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ -- for more on CMAQ funding see page 14) program funding by the local Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The \$24 million project is now fully funded, reports Goodman. In total, funds were used from FTA Sections 5309 and 5311, CMAQ, Private Section Cable and Land, the Public Utility District and the Public Improvement District.

Goodman expects that due to the transit corridor The Woodlands Town Center will need fewer parking spaces and facilities, freeing up considerable acres of land for more people-oriented development like parks and recreational facilities. He also points to the clustering of restaurants, shops and business-related services along the corridor as a result of the transit development.

"It's all part of making a community liveable," sums up Goodman. "Creating good solutions takes perseverance and understanding the various stakeholders impacted by transit."

El Paso Livable Communities Project

In 1994, the city of El Paso, Texas was seeking to reduce auto congestion in its downtown area and attract riders to transit to meet air quality standards imposed on this non-attainment area. City officials studied the feasibility of building an innovative downtown transportation terminal and intercept parking facility. The idea was to provide downtown visitors with an area to both park and then ride transit services to multiple destinations without further need for single-occupant trips. The results of the feasibility assessment were positive.

Consistent with Goodman's development concepts, El Paso officials planned to make the transit terminal and parking facility part of a larger community redevelopment effort. Known locally as the Downtown Improvement Program, the city had dedicated nearly \$90 million to reconstruct downtown streets and expand its convention center and other public facilities.

City officials decided to locate the terminal in Union Plaza, an emerging downtown redevelopment pocket adjacent to the convention center. With its rich history and ties to El Paso's railroad past, Union Plaza houses a diverse collection of transportation facilities. Anchored on the west by the historic Union Railroad Depot, the Plaza encompasses 14 city blocks and three additional intercity bus terminals. The proposed facility will interject a strong presence of El Paso's local transit operator (Sun Metro) and enable connections to all parts of the city.

Pedestrian connections throughout the area will be enhanced by the Union Plaza Streetscape Project. Funded by FTA's Livable Communities program, all streets and sidewalks will be reconstructed with a design recalling the neighborhood's railroad roots. Redevelopment incentives in the area are being offered by the city to encourage the growth of an entertainment district (restaurants, clubs, theaters, etc.) and cultural district (museums, parks, residences, community services).

"The city is intent on redeveloping this area without destroying the traditional residential neighborhoods or displacing families," says Goodman.

The Goodman Corp., began work on the Union Plaza Transit Terminal and Parking Facility in 1995 as the centerpiece of several downtown transit improvements including the Oregon Street Pedestrian Mall, San Antonio Avenue Transit Plaza and the International Intermodal Transit Terminal.

Construction of the streetscapes has been underway since November. Utility replacement and underground relocation of electrical lines are nearly complete in the cultural district. The first two completely reconstructed blocks are scheduled to debut this April, with all street work being completed late next year. Meanwhile, Sun Metro is acquiring land and designing the terminal, which is expected to be completed at the same time as the streetscape.

A central obstacle to the success of the El Paso Project is its complicated funding package, which includes several FTA programs, private utilities, city bond funds and community coordination.

"Success will be measured by lively bus activity between the terminal and other destinations throughout downtown," explains Goodman. "Along with thriving business in the cultural and entertainment districts."

Conclusion

According to Goodman, the role of community transportation needs to be fully understood before its role in community development can be tapped.

"This industry's story is so much more than just how many people are riding," he says. "It's jobs and livable communities and energy conservation."

And with this vision firmly focused, Goodman sees limitless possibilities for the future of community transportation.

"It's just a matter of finding the right ingredients locally. There are always tools available," he insists. "There's no such thing as 'Can't be done.'"