

Connecting Io

The people of Iowa are fortunate to have two U. S. senators that both appreciate and understand public and community transportation. Both now serving their fourth terms, Senator Charles Grassley and Senator Tom Harkin took the time before the 108th Congress began to talk to Community Transportation magazine about the upcoming reauthorization, about senior citizens and their need for improved medical transportation, about employment transportation and a host of other key topics.

Iowa is a state in transition. The state's economy is shifting away from farm-based and manufacturing jobs toward retail and services employment, with job growth concentrated in the more urbanized areas. Many residents are already making intercity commutes to work. How can community transportation address the changing geography of work, and meet the mobility needs of residents in rural and small-town locations? What is transit's role in Iowa's workforce development?

Sen. Harkin: Our modern workforce needs to be both mobile and flexible. In Iowa and many other farm states, shifting job patterns have too often separated those seeking employment and training from available jobs. Many Iowans look for work from further and further away, for those in small towns, in inner cities and those who live in a suburb are often finding getting to work more difficult. Transit's role is crucial for a considerable share of Iowa's workers. Effective public and community transportation bring Iowans and work together. Iowa enjoys statewide transit coverage in rural areas, although it is one with severe financial limitations. Our cities are working to expand their route systems to new areas following job and we have a great experiment in Cedar Rapids allowing for a subsidized taxi service outside of normal transit hours. Iowa's transit may not seem very large to those from large cities, but it crucial to a great many Iowans. Moving people is what it is all about.

Sen. Grassley: You're right, Iowa has been faced with many challenges from a changing

Iowa

Senator Harkin



economy. To have profitable businesses and attract new ones, you must be able to supply a ready workforce. This means that many Iowans have to travel further distances to provide for their families.

The transit operations in the state are helping many Iowans get to their jobs, child care, and skills training. I know that the transit agencies throughout the state are evaluating their current services with a mobile workforce in mind. It's important that the federal government provide adequate resources, with flexibility, so transit agencies can help families meet their needs.

Iowa's transit agencies have been working to meet these needs in many positive ways. Several communities have formed innovative partnerships with other organizations to help people get to their jobs. For example, the Cedar Rapids area has the Neighborhood Transportation Program. This program helps second- and third shift workers get to their jobs when regular bus service ends.

Iowa has the fifth highest proportion of citizens over age 65, and the highest proportion of citizens over age 85 in the nation. Nearly 42 percent of Iowa's seniors reside in rural locations. How can transit help the state's aging residents stay in their homes and stay a part of their communities?

Sen. Harkin: Our senior citizens and those with disabilities have been a priority for me throughout my time in the United States Senate. I've fought hard to increase federal support for them whether it's been in the reauthorization of the



Senator Grassley

Older Americans Act or in the last transportation reauthorization that created TEA-21. While I was not able to increase formula funding for small systems to the extent that I desired, we made real progress and I hope that further real advances will be achieved in 2003. Without adequate accessible transportation, life for older Americans and those with disabilities becomes increasingly more difficult. I've worked with your Association on issues related to mobility and healthcare for seniors and it's obvious to me — we need more access — and we need it now. We must increase investment in our transportation services for older Americans and those with disabilities. And, I'm going to continue to fight for the kinds of investments we need for them. You know, you do these things for many reasons. But you do it because it is the right thing to do.

Sen. Grassley: Iowa's transit operations are vital to rural senior citizens. Many elderly Iowans rely on the fixed route urban systems for their transportation needs in Iowa's cities and nearly three-fourths of the rides provided by rural transit agencies are for elderly or dis-

abled riders. Knowing that they are able to have their transportation needs met allows senior citizens to remain independent.

Also, Iowa has a provision in the Code of Iowa which requires any agency spending public funds for passenger transportation services to consolidate or coordinate those services with the locally designated public transit system or lose that public funding. This helps Iowa maximize funds and services for Iowans. This provision especially helps elderly Iowans stay in their homes and stay active in their communities, yet receive the important services they need.

With aging residents come concomitant needs for medical care. Changes in Medicare's reimbursement policy for non-emergency medical transportation could reduce the use of costly ambulance trips and emergency room visits while improving access to routine medical services for many seniors. How do you view such proposed changes in our Medicare program?

Sen. Harkin: Your Association is always reminding me that the best healthcare in the world doesn't do any good if you can't get there. Access to a doctor and other health professionals is crucial, particularly in rural areas. I worked hard in the last session of Congress to help resolve the issues surrounding transportation care. I'm working with you and others to find a way to solve the problems of those who need transportation at a reasonable cost. We made progress

last year and you can be sure we will continue to work on this important issue in 2003, hopefully with the passage of legislation.

Sen. Grassley: I support all efforts to improve Medicare and to make it more efficient. Medicare is a good program that seniors rely on, but it's sorely out of date. As Chairman and ranking member of the Finance Committee, I've been developing legislation to strengthen and improve the program, so that seniors get better benefits. Although adding prescription drug coverage is the most important new change we can make, other new benefits, like non-emergency transportation, could be looked at too, especially if they have the potential to save money (under current law, transportation by ambulance is covered by Medicare only if medically necessary and only for certain kinds of trips). I'm always open to new ideas to improve Medicare and bring this important program into the 21st century.

Senator Baucus (D-Mont.), with strong bipartisan support, has introduced several pieces of legislation (MEGA RED, MEGA RURAL) that would substantially increase federal transit investment in urban and rural communities across the country, and in transit services for people with disabilities and the elderly, with the goal of stimulating economic growth through access to opportunities. How would such increased funding levels impact Iowa's communities? How might this impact TEA-21 reauthorization?

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Sen. Harkin: I strongly support an increase in transit funding with a focus on rural areas and smaller urban systems. While transit is crucial in these areas, usually, local governments' willingness and capability to support transit is lower than in large urban areas where transit serves a greater share of the population. People's livelihoods are dependent on transit and many cannot lead an independent life, acquiring the basics through a visit to a grocery store or drug store or do many of the social things that are important to us all. I'm going to make sure the needs of senior citizens, of people with disabilities, of commuters and of all Iowans across the state are addressed in this reauthorization — just as I did the last time. There is no better time to build the systems we need for our state and our nation than now.

Sen. Grassley: The Finance Committee has primary jurisdiction over the Mass Transit Account of the Highway Trust Fund. As Chairman I'm actively working on TEA-21 reauthorization. I'm carefully reviewing proposals and working with my Senate colleagues to maximize transit dollars to rural states, like Iowa. Increased funds will allow transit agencies throughout the state to build on the services they are already providing and further help meet the needs of Iowa's families. 🚌

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ployment opportunities. Grant money combined with city and county investment, and, until last year, with TANF funds, allows MTA to offer reduced fares for low-income individuals, extended service hours, employer subscriber services for second- and third-shift workers and The Missing Link, a 24-hour van service to fill mobility gaps in regular service.

The JARC grant also contributes to the Work and Gain Economic Self-sufficiency (WAGES) program. Job Access Director PJ Sass maintains a database to match job seekers with not only job openings but also day care and transit service. The skills training and job preparation efforts of the WAGES program offer the biggest payoff when combined with mobility.

"That's key," emphasizes Sass. "They hold each other hand in hand."

Such complimentary leveraging applies to transit investment. Federal and state support is enhanced by the Des Moines area community's commitment.

"We have such great support — mayors, city managers, council members. Even in these tough budget times," says Spade about member cities that increased their investment in the Authority by 17 percent this fiscal year. "Everyone is talking about the importance of transit to the community."

Everything in Its Place

Before leaving Iowa, I'm having a good look around — the restaurant row of Court Avenue Station, the Resthaven pond where we used to feed the swans, the Playhouse, the lake where we held our Fourth of July picnics, the Civic Center and adjacent Nollen Plaza, the golf course where we used to go sledding, the Drake Diner, the hotel where I first entered the laborforce, the Art Center, the mall where I mispent my teenage years, the ever-stunning gold-domed Capitol.

But I'm seeing everything differently this time. Seeing these places as destinations, destinations that connect people. And my concern for mobility options in the state is more than a professional interest. My connection to Iowa remains personal.

Sitting in the living room of my parents' townhouse in West Des Moines, I can see a small section of EP True Parkway through the window. I feel a sense of comfort when I spot an MTA bus rolling by. Transit is making its way to this area. As my parents age, I need to know that their community will keep them connected — that should they stop driving, they can still get to the grocery store, make medical appointments and join friends for breakfast at Baker's Square. For them, for my childhood friends and their families and for communities just like theirs around the nation, it makes sense that *transit* is the beginning of *transition*.

We are a nation in transition, economically and demographically. Iowa is our bellwether; how transit's potential plays out here, how effectively it evolves alongside the communities it serves, offers us a roadmap. In moving forward, we're looking for the signposts: cooperation and coordination, partnership and loyalty, education and flexibility, innovation and transformation, passion and tenacity. They're all here in this place called Iowa. 🚌