

# Build it and They Will Come

ITN Seeks Sustainable Senior Transit Service with Car-Like Convenience

by Kathy Freund

By almost all measures, except one, the Independent Transportation Network (ITN) is a tiny transit service. Currently operating within a 15-mile radius of Portland, Maine, the ITN serves approximately 600 people age 65 or older, and another 50 people with visual impairments. Started in 1995 with three volunteer drivers, no company owned vehicles and 40 senior riders, the ITN now provides more than 1,200 rides a month, with 75 volunteers driving their own cars and five paid drivers using four company vehicles.

So far, this is a story similar to that of hundreds, perhaps thousands of similar transit services, with committed providers, toiling away, in communities across the United States.

What makes the ITN different is its goal, the idea that shapes and drives every service and design decision made in its pursuit. The goal of the ITN is to meet the mobility needs of America's aging population by developing an economically sustainable, nonprofit transportation service for seniors that is suitable for replication in other communities across the country.

The need for such an alternative is everywhere apparent, not only to those whose profession it is to try to meet that transportation need, but to older adults who fearfully contemplate the end of their driving careers and to their families, who join them in this fearful contemplation. It is also apparent to the news media that dwell increasingly on older driver vehicle crashes, the most overtly alarming of the unintended consequences of this rapidly emerging problem.

## **Economically Sustainable and Convenient Solutions Needed**

The reasoning that led to this goal follows a simple and logical path to the convergence of several significant trends. First, America's population is aging. In 20 years, approximately one in five Americans will be age 65 or older. Second, three-quarters of that aging population is disbursed across rural and suburban communities without the density to support traditional mass transit. Third, there are a proportionately greater number of older licensed drivers, and they are increasing the amount they drive. Fourth, the functional impairments of age increase crash risk for seniors, especially fatal crash risk. Recent projections (see page 20) place the older driver annual fatal crash risk for the year 2020 at 18,934.

That is higher than the current alcohol-related annual fatal crash risk of 17,100. Finally, there is an intangible but extremely important need for independence and choice, a need cultivated through a lifetime of get-up-and-go automobility.

Juxtapose this set of converging circumstances with the impending tax burden created by Social Security and Medicare, and the need for an economically sustainable solution pops up on the radar screen. And it is not going away.

The problem can now be posed as a question: How do we create a transportation solution for older adults so attractive to them, as consumers, it will pass the fundamental economic test of willingness to pay? This is, after all, the multi-billion dollar test the automobile passes every minute of the day. Here's another question: What does the automobile give consumers that makes it such an attractive transportation option, and how can we design those desirable characteristics into a transportation service for people who want the comfort and convenience of the private automobile, but who can no longer safely drive one? The answers to these seemingly simple questions have dictated the service design of the Independent Transportation Network.

The ITN uses cars, rather than vans or buses, to pick seniors up and take them where they need to go. Seniors pay for their rides by the mile, with discounts for advance planning and rideshare. Rides scheduled by 6:00 p.m. the day before they are needed cost half as much as rides requested on demand. The choice, however, is the consumer's. Likewise, rides shared with others cost less, and the more people in the vehicle, the lower the charge. Eighty percent of seniors who regularly use the ITN have expressed a willingness to share rides.

Through a TRANSIT-IDEA grant, and with assistance from Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) and GeoFields, the ITN is developing a geographic information system (GIS) component for its software that will permit computer-assisted human decisions so dispatchers can offer rideshare options to seniors when they schedule their rides. Consumers may ride alone, or ride with others. This is the way people use automobiles. Sometimes they ride with others, sometimes, alone. Sometimes they plan in advance, sometimes they don't. The ITN offers all choices, and charges accordingly.

Everyone who rides the ITN opens a pre-paid transportation account. Dispatchers, drivers and volunteer drivers record the time, distance and purpose of each ride. Customers receive monthly statements detailing every trip, the amount debited from their account and the amount they are requested to advance for the forthcoming month.

Again, like the automobile, payment is made in advance, and once a month. No cash changes hands in the vehicle, and no taxi-like meter is used. ITN cars are unmarked, just as personal cars are unmarked. An ITN volunteer or paid driver in a fleet vehicle arriving to pick up a senior customer looks like a neighbor, friend or relative.

The ITN is also a membership organization. This key feature is designed to replace the feeling of belonging that accompanies automobile ownership. People who own and drive cars belong to something, some mass, intangible American persona. People who stop driving lose that, and any successful transportation service designed to replace the automobile must somehow understand this issue. Membership in a group is only one way to approach this understanding.

Currently, ITN has about 350 dues-paying members in 25 states and Canada. Membership is open to individuals who use the service, and to those who wish to support it. Adult children of senior customers, businesses, corporations and even seniors living in other communities waiting for an ITN in their hometown all are members of the Independent Transportation Network. This year, the ITN also introduced a Corporate Partners program to help fund our regularly published newsletter, our web site ([www.itninc.org](http://www.itninc.org)) and the Ambassadors Program , a form of senior speakers bureau.

## **Avoiding Public Funds is Key**

Consumer fares do not cover the full cost of an ITN ride, however, and the ultimate success of the project -- the test of its sustainability -- lies in finding ways to cover this cost without turning to an on-going public subsidy. This is not to imply there is anything wrong with using taxpayer dollars to meet a public need as important as mobility for citizens who have lived beyond their driving years. Indeed, the ITN is using taxpayer dollars to fund much of its research and development, and as a nonprofit organization, it receives many benefits denied to for-profit businesses.

The problem with relying too heavily, in the long run, on taxpayer dollars is that there simply are not enough of them. Scarcity of public resources also causes many of the service delivery problems with which transit providers and transit customers are all too familiar, such as rationing of rides based on worthiness of purpose (medical need, food shopping) or time of day and day of the week limitations.

Another problem that public funding causes is service area restriction. This problem arises when a customer needs a ride from one publicly funded service area to another, and the transportation provider is not permitted to cross an imaginary administrative or political boundary that has nothing to do with the customers transportation needs. If the ITN can achieve economic sustainability without relying on subsidy allocated by administrative district, it can avoid this common frustration

and limitation. When supported by consumer fares and community support, the ITN can rest freely in the marketplace like any other business, and cross political boundaries just like McDonalds. Why not?

Numerous research efforts are underway to try to gain access to the consumer dollars necessary for economic sustainability. These efforts include innovative payment plans involving businesses and families of seniors who use the service. The business program is called the Merchant Participation program, and it really is no more complicated than a parking sticker. ITN recruits area businesses to issue pre-printed stickers to their senior customers who ride the ITN. Those stickers help pay for the ride, with part of the money going to the senior, and part going to the ITN to help cover the operating loss for that ride. Participating merchants set up accounts, just as participating seniors do. Merchant accounts are debited to pay for rides, just as senior accounts are debited.

A second innovative payment plan involves gift certificates sold to adult children through a gift catalogue. Gifts may be for transportation only, for transportation combined with gift certificates for purchases or for transportation combined with dinner and tickets for a special occasion. These gifts are called, respectively, the All About Town plan, the Dynamic Duo and the Works , named by a teenage volunteer who designed the catalogue as a summer project. Adult children and seniors may pay for gift certificates and deposit funds into accounts with a credit card. Somewhere down the road, the ITN may have an affinity credit card to raise revenue, just like many other nonprofit membership organization.

## **Harmonious Co-Existence with Transit Neighbors**

Beyond the great work involved in climbing the high hill to economic sustainability, there are several other exciting challenges. Developing the tools to replicate our Portland, Maine effort in other communities is certainly one. The ITN is building its own dispatch and database software, a monumental task in itself, but one that will prove invaluable to others trying to duplicate this solution. A handbook is also in the works. A strategic plan for governance must be developed, and a methodology for raising the capital to start new systems is a must if the goal, ever before us, of meeting the mobility needs of the many millions of Americans aging out of their automobiles is to be reached.

Here, in the greater Portland area, the ITN coexists harmoniously with its transit neighbors, the METRO bus service and the (Community Transportation Association member) Regional Transportation Program (RTP), the local paratransit provider. But sometimes there are cool drafts of resentment from paratransit providers in other locations. Wherever the ITN goes, if it goes, it must coexist with its

transportation neighbors, both public and private. Heaven knows there is enough unmet need out there for everyone.

## **The Changing Face of Transportation**

Transportation is changing. In many ways, the ITN may be a forerunner of the transportation services of the future. Americans like their transportation fast, instant, unplanned and designed to provide multiple options at any moment. It is possible that Americans like their transportation this way, not because they have grown up and grown old with automobiles, but because automobiles fit the modern sensibility. So do telephones, especially portable cellular phones. So do the internet and e-mail. So do fast food restaurants. If mass transit is to become a desirable consumer choice, one for which non-driving seniors are willing to pay, it must understand the allure of these modern trends, and it must evolve.

The ITN is an effort to build a transportation solution for the common good where all of the paying participants are voluntary seniors, businesses, families and members of the community -- because all of the participants benefit. Structurally and operationally, it is more like a web than a hierarchy or the more traditional linear transportation service.

Together with the development of this risky and ambitious model must go consumer education, a recognition and understanding that transportation is a lifelong need. Outliving one's driving years, in the future, may very well become the norm, not the exception. Financial planners and policy makers can play an important and constructive role in this process by providing instruments and developing incentives for people to think about and plan for the cost of personal transportation beyond the driving years.

Working with others, ITN is attempting to promote and sustain an on-going exploration of personal transportation solutions.

Kathy Freund is the executive director of the Independent Transportation Network (ITN). Earlier this year, she appeared on NBC-TV's Today show to discuss her innovative mobility concepts. The ITN is sponsoring a think-tank conference at the Stone House in Freeport, Maine, October 16 and 17 that will address the theme of federal policies to help older Americans achieve personal transportation solutions through the financial planning necessary to pay for those needs. Call 207.772.2077 for more details.