

# Breakthrough!

Kansas State Legislature boosts transit funds by 600 percent.

by Steve Feigenbaum

Everything changed for public transportation in Kansas last spring. On May 10, 1999, Kansas Governor Bill Graves signed into law the Comprehensive Transportation Program (CTP) -- which guarantees an increase in state public transportation funding from \$6 million to \$60 million during the next 10 years.

I've been told that this is one of the most significant state transit funding achievements in recent history. This is the story of how public and community transportation advocates won this outstanding victory.

As you might imagine, the enactment of the CTP did not happen overnight. The new law is the culmination of more than a decade of diligent work by the Kansas Public Transit Association (KPTA) and its members to raise the level of state funding for public transportation. And there is no secret to our success -- KPTA and its membership simply kept the issue of public transportation funding in the forefront of its activities.

To understand how KPTA and its members won this achievement, and to place the CTP in proper context, let's review the history of state funding in Kansas.

## The First Step

Prior to 1989 there was no state public transportation funding in Kansas. The transit network was largely unorganized and uncoordinated. In 1989 the association and its members were able to secure the first state funding as a portion of Kansas's Comprehensive Highway Program, an eight-year program. The highway program provided \$390,000 annually for elderly and disabled transportation. This initial funding was a throw-in to win the support of a few legislators who were reluctant to support a highways-only program. The \$390,000 figure was not scientifically arrived at (it was leftover within the bill) and it did not stretch very far across the state.

Following up on this meager -- but important -- first step, in 1992, the State Legislature passed the Coordinated Transit Districts (CTD) Act. The Act allowed public transportation organizations to coordinate and consolidate operations within the district. And to emphasize the importance of coordination, membership in a Coordinated Transit District was a condition of receiving state funding. Eventually 15 CTDs were formed ranging in size from a single county to one stretching across 28 counties.

The CTD process brought agencies together that previously did not communicate with each other on a regular basis. In some cases, these transit agencies didn't even know each other existed. And because these cooperative transit arrangements were based on mutual geography and clientele -- as opposed to some legislative language -- they prospered.

## **The Next Level**

In 1994 KPTA presented a bold initiative to the State Legislature to increase the state funding of public transportation from \$390,000 to \$2,000,000. During the course of the house and senate hearings on this initiative, a simple question arose, "How much funding do you need to address the true public transportation needs in Kansas?"

Curiously, it was a question we weren't prepared to adequately answer. The legislators, the Kansas Department of Transportation, and KPTA all agreed that \$390,000 was inadequate, but no one could put a finger on the actual amount needed to address statewide public transportation needs. Eventually, on a near unanimous vote, the legislature raised the funding level to \$1 million.

It was during this period that our association and its members began developing real support for public and community transportation within the State Legislature. We worked to keep in close contact with legislative supporters via their local constituents and avoided giving non-supporters any fodder for their efforts. Fortunately, in Kansas, public transportation had no real enemies. All of this work would pay off later.

We realized that we had been fortunate to get a funding increase without providing good data on transit's actual needs. Our original funding had been so low that no one could argue that it was nowhere near adequate. But we hadn't yet made our case.

We considered this first \$1 million in funding as our foot-in-the-door. We felt like the state had committed to fund public transportation and there was no going back. The association began to showcase the Coordinated Transit Districts to the state legislature as organizations created to promote public transportation efficiency and maximize the effectiveness of state public transportation dollars. We knew we needed to set a dollar amount of actual and reasonable need for public transportation.

Eventually the Kansas Department of Transportation agreed to fund a needs-assessment study for rural public transportation to be performed by the Kansas University Transportation Center. Kansas urban systems would provide their own statistics on needs either via in-house efforts or a study to be provided by Kansas

State University. We intended to tie together all the completed need assessments into a single, statewide number.

## **It All Begins with Awareness**

An issue that cropped up early in the state funding process was that of the awareness level of our state legislators regarding public transport in Kansas. Frankly, legislators did not know much at all about public transportation, for instance they often confused public transportation with roads and bridges.

At the Governor's office, we endured a long talk about how NAFTA's reduced trucking regulations would help us. We didn't have the heart to tell the former Governor that we moved people, not goods.

At one of our legislative receptions, a legislator pointed to a map of statewide transit providers and seemed genuinely surprised to see several agencies in his district. I remember him saying, "I don't have any transit in my district so this is incorrect. Transit is only in Wichita, Topeka and Kansas City." Later we saw to it that the our members in his district called him and took him on a tour of their properties. The legislator became a great supporter of public transit. We realized that we needed to educate legislators about public transportation.

In 1989 Kansas had nearly 200 public transportation operators under the former Sections 9, 16 and 18 programs. This large number worked to our advantage as it gave Kansas a public transportation operator in nearly every legislative district. Accordingly, we embarked upon a three-step program to educate members of the state legislature:

- Personal visits to key legislators by KPTA board members;
- A KPTA program to encourage public transportation operators to invite legislators to their sites and tour their operations; and
- An annual association-sponsored reception for state legislators in the Capitol during the legislative session.

The net effect of these educational activities was a state legislature that was keenly aware of public transportation in 1999, particularly as compared with 1989. I can't overstate how important it is to develop a solid, working relationship with members of the legislature.

One of KPTA's overall goals -- like any association -- is to increase its membership. Dues are kept affordable to encourage membership. Between 1989 and 1999, the association membership increased from 50 to 140, which allowed us to develop a statewide network of public transportation operators who could be called upon to assist in legislative efforts when needed. This network paid off between 1994 and

1998 when the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) and the Joint House/Senate Committee on Transportation held a series of summer hearings on transportation in Kansas. We made sure that a public transportation advocate was present at virtually every hearing held, keeping public transportation visible to key decision makers.

I should also note that both urban and rural transportation providers were always united in these efforts. We decided to present Kansas's public transportation network as one program with many variations across the state. At no time did we allow differences in size and scope to divide our efforts. Both urban and rural operators were exemplary in keeping to the nonsectarian approach.

### **Good Fortune Never Hurts, Either**

Of course, nothing monumental occurs without a little luck. In this effort we enjoyed a few fortunate turns of events.

A new Governor was elected in 1994, one who understood the issues surrounding public transportation and advocated a multi-modal approach to renewing the highway program.

The new Governor appointed a Kansas DOT Secretary who shared our association's goal of developing a vital, statewide public transportation program.

Highway advocacy groups began to realize that public transportation could bring an important human services element to the fore that highway groups alone could not. KPTA eventually joined and was given a board seat on the largest and most influential highway group in the state.

All of these elements coalesced in 1998. Governor Graves had consistently proposed a Comprehensive Transportation Program for Kansas and the time had come for legislative action. The foundation for our victory had been built, but much work remained.

### **Victory Achieved**

In July 1998, Governor Graves appointed the Transportation 2000 (T-2000) Task Force. The task force was charged with the task of developing a multi-modal, 10-year transportation program and plan for Kansas. Of the 28 task force members, one was from the public transportation community, which meant that transit interests would be heard. Beginning in August 1998, the T-2000 committee launched a series of 12 public hearings across the state on transit issues. It was then that the work of the past decade began to pay off.

Because KPTA had -- over the course of 10 years -- built a statewide organization, we were able to ensure a solid public transportation presence at each hearing. Task force members heard from Kansans about their public transportation needs, including stories of access to the community denied because of lack of public transportation. Following the conclusion of the hearings, most T-2000 members' biggest surprise was the public outpouring for public transportation services. The T-2000 committee also reviewed data from the Kansas University Transportation Center's rural area need analysis and similar studies on behalf of urban operators. KDOT presented additional data on public transportation including statistics on anticipated federal funding levels.

By December 1998, the T-2000 committee presented Governor Graves its final report. It had heard the call for public transportation and recommended annual expenditures for a staggering \$8.8 million! The funds were to be divided 59 percent urban and 41 percent rural.

When the Kansas Legislature convened in January 1999 the CTP was already the hot topic of the session. The program called for major investment in all transportation modes and billions of dollars spent over 10 years on highways. Because the Governor was solidly behind the program and because the old highway program had just about run out, our association felt that the chance of success was high. When the new Comprehensive Transit Program bill was introduced, public transportation was funded for \$5 million annually, but we knew that that was unlikely to be the final number. During January and February, the Joint House/Senate Committee on Transportation conducted another series of hearings on the transit program, and again the association was organized to have individuals testify at all hearings.

At last, in April 1999, the Comprehensive Transportation Program was passed overwhelmingly in both houses with public transportation appropriated at a final figure of \$60 million over the next decade.

## **Mission Accomplished**

What does this all mean for Kansas? Taking into account the guaranteed federal transit funding increases detailed in TEA-21, Kansas immediately goes from one of the most poorly funded states on a per capita basis to one of the better-funded states. Money will now be available to replace capital equipment being operated past optimum replacement. Cities such as Hutchinson and Lawrence now have additional funds available to implement long-planned new starts. Rural operators will be able to institute inter-regional service for medical trips as well as night/weekend services.

The enactment of the new transit program should not be seen as a panacea. Regardless of the amount of funds available, some needed services still cannot be provided. Public transportation in Kansas cannot hope to be all things to all persons -- at least not yet. There will be the predictable squabbles on how best to spend the funds; which is the nature of things when so much money becomes available. But we can now plan for needs and accommodate growth.

The process to get to this point took our association 10 years and massive amounts of volunteer time. The process was often torturous but ultimately worthwhile. The mission was accomplished because a goal was set and a group of unified and organized citizens made it happen.