

Leadership & Vision

Predicting the future is not something with which too many community transit managers worry themselves. The business of getting transit service out on the streets can be exhausting. Throw in the challenges of meeting various federal regulations, responding to customer needs and always tight budgets, and, well, you know the story.

Still, there are plenty of community transit managers and advocates who have a firm idea of our industry's future, and how -- collectively -- it will be achieved.

What, specifically, do you see as the future for your transit agency -- or for community transit in general -- and how will this vision of the future be achieved?

Larry Hall, Tulsa Transit

As someone who has ventured into the fray from both the rural and urban side, I don't see our goals for the future being very different.

We in transit need to move from just operating systems to providing mobility, in whatever form that takes. From buses to vans, carpools, walking, bicycles; all are forms of mobility. Use them. In every community across our nation, who is better suited to perform this duty but the transit professionals? We deal 100 percent in the movement of people, by accessing different resources available and putting them to use. We should posture ourselves in the next millenium as mobility managers, not just bus or van operators.

Leverage your expertise, sell your services to agencies who use transportation, but don't understand what it takes to truly coordinate or develop routes for the most efficient use of assets. We for years, in our industry, have not sold ourselves as a valuable tool in closing gaps to services and accessing opportunities to increase the quality of life.

Jo Ann Hutchinson, Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged

Here is what I see for the future from a state-level bureaucrat.

I see more need for integrated services with a need to consolidate all transportation funds into one central location to really be serious about community transportation in every community. In the meantime, it is imperative that real coordination be required at every state level by Congress and state officials. This way we can begin to develop a community atmosphere for all types of rider needs.

The days of a system for welfare riders vs. seniors, I believe, are not in the best interest of those people or the taxpayers. I also believe we need to find better ways to include and serve the consumers in establishing and maintaining these systems. And more resources to meet more needs will occur once this spirit of community coordination is a reality, resulting in more trips -- which should be a goal for all of us.

Nancy Willis, Surface Transportation Policy Project

I think the use of van pools (or just vans) is going to really take off in the future. They are flexible and responsive, and can be economical (under certain conditions). Vans may be a stop gap while the back to the cities movement is occurring (at a slower rate than sprawl). I think car pools should be included in this category as well.

Jill Hamilton, Ohio State University

The future of Community Transportation is largely dependent on how and when we educate our present passengers and our potential customers. Without a comprehensive outreach program including information, explanations and demonstrations about where and when to get on a bus, how to pay the fare, where to stand on a crowded bus, how to read a time table, etc., many people will continue to drive rather than ride.

Printed information is simply not enough to convince people to ride rather than drive. Customers often don't trust that the timetable or map applies to them; they want a personal explanation (read: confirmation that they are on the right route). Promotions are fine, but education is necessary. Potential riders want information and an invitation to become a part of a new community. They already are a part of the driving community and feel comfortable getting stuck in traffic, fighting for a parking space and contributing to the degeneration of the air quality. It's never comfortable to move into a new community; it's always nice to have a friend in the neighborhood.

Likewise it's also appreciated when the neighbor knocks on your door to tell you where the grocery store is, the closest restaurants and the protocol of the block. In educating customers, transit authorities must go to the customer rather than expect the customer to come to them. Information should come to the customer in the form of workshops, outreach programs and even standing at the bus stops ready to talk with the riders. Customers can pick up a transit schedule or informational brochure. But without an explanation or demonstration the hesitant rider will often opt to drive instead. Why run the risk of getting lost when you already know how to get there? We need to tell them that we've got an even better way.

John Sorrell, Wiregrass Transit Authority

There is an old saying that goes, "Be careful what you ask for -- you may get it." We in the transit industry may be facing this dilemma. A recent reversal (for the better) in our funding fortunes and the willingness of the Congress to address some of the serious funding shortfalls that have beset the industry for the past five years places us in a very precarious position.

Congress has heard our cries, it is now our obligation to, "put up or shut up".

From my perspective, the greatest challenge for the immediate future is finding the ability to communicate openly and effectively among ourselves and to remove barriers and institutional walls.

How do we secure the future?

Communicate frequently, clearly and honestly between transit providers, social service providers and funding agencies.

Stay focused on the consumer, not the self-perpetuating tyranny of bureaucracy and empire building.

Be inventive and imaginative -- the status quo may well be inadequate

Try to avoid saying NO

Don't say YES unless you can deliver

Share resources and opportunities as well as burdens

Never be satisfied with adequate

Remember that "better may be the enemy of good".

There is another area of conflict and misunderstanding that exists that all of us should actively attempt to eliminate. That is the apparent (and incomprehensible) competition and animosity that exists in some areas between urban providers and the rural providers that surround them. We must all work together to deliver quality service if we are to have any hope of delivering on the implicit promises we made to secure additional funding.

Finally, we must remember that transit is about people -- Riders, employees, employers, local officials and citizens. If we allow ourselves to become so enmeshed in the day-to-day tribulations of programmatic then no one is served. Rather, we need to develop such a strong and vibrant system within our respective regions that everyone is happy.

Jeanne Erickson, Colorado Association of Transit Agencies (CASTA)

Community transit is the future of transit. To those who are not very involved with passenger transportation issues, it seems that the future is more automobile travel. That is understandable because to those who don't need it, community transit is invisible. It's really important to stress the

advantages of transit -- a way to meet interesting people, a chance to observe a beautiful spring day, to catch up on reading or paperwork or to eliminate the parking problem.

The increase in auto traffic means that people who are uncomfortable driving, an aging population for example, will look for passenger transportation services. Many people will use the bus in inclement weather and/or unfamiliar places.

In Colorado's resort communities, transit ridership is three times what it was 10 years ago. The people who ride are mostly locals commuting to work, skiing, shopping and other basic needs (in Colorado skiing is a basic need). Tourists also ride in great numbers. These are people who won't ride the bus in Grand Rapids, but as visitors to Aspen, it's the way to go because of the lack of parking and the snow and ice on roads in winter. It's a good way to see the area and the bus drivers and passengers make for free and knowledgeable guide service. It's a pleasant way to be introduced to community transit.

I'm told by gambling interests, that many older adults gamble because the people get a free ride to-and-from. It's a way to get out of the house without risking life and limb [but not your wallet] in the traffic. As a bonus, Colorado's gambling communities are located in areas where the scenery is spectacular along the way -- while parking is inconvenient and restricted.

In my view the emphasis on air quality as the reason for transit is rather misguided. How many people do you know who ride the bus to clean the air -- give me a break. It does not make sense to many politicians and their contributions to fund transit for that reason. They see transit as a potential solution to congestion and as a convenient way for people to get where they need to go, if they think about it at all. We should be selling it that way.

Judy McGrane, Community Transit of Delaware County (Pa.)

If our objective is to secure the tremendous accomplishments of the last 25 years, and to continue to improve mobility for the transportation disenfranchised, then we must focus on balance, on equity and on determining what is a satisfactory level of mobility for all citizens.

We're at a point, in my opinion, where lots of mobility is available to one group of citizens (with the formidable price paid by tax payers), while the bare minimum or none is available to other groups.

Urban residents with disabilities who meet the eligibility requirements of their transit authorities enjoy levels of service mirroring fixed routes. Next-day, door-to-door, 18 hours-a-day, 365 days-a-year service is a comfortable level of service, at a relatively affordable price. But urban residents with disabilities who live across the street from the prescribed service area rarely enjoy even the smallest fraction of such service. Even if these residents have access to a community transit service, without subsidy the fare is prohibitive. No urban, rural or medical assistance subsidy program will get them to their classes, markets or jobs.

No one will argue that the first scenario is optimum, and that it is a most desirable standard for all citizens, regardless of where we live. But can, or should, such a level of service be sustained in the face of such disparity? Is it realistic to argue for this level of service across the board, for every resident with a transportation disadvantage?

The cost of transporting no one between the hours of 8:00 p.m., and 11:30 p.m., then one solo rider at 11:35 p.m., could perhaps support the cost of getting five currently "ineligible" riders to an employment cluster.

Perhaps the task at hand is to define sufficient, in the context of sustainability. Maybe as a society we should take a hard look at better distributing the rewards of our hard work. Let's not let our communities hide behind regulatory limitations.

Ken Hosen, KFH Group

My experience over the last 10 years as a consultant is that rural and small urban transit systems have a number of problems, some can be solved with more money and some require hard work.

The fact is, one of the greatest problems is the need for newer, safer and more reliable small transit vehicles. The problem is two-fold: Many agencies do not have enough capital funds to keep up with replacement vehicles, therefore they rely on equipment that is aging and not designed for the demands being placed upon it.

I have visited a number of rural systems that had average fleet mileage of over 150,000 miles. These vehicles were not designed to last that long without significant preventive and on-going maintenance.

Eric Wolf, AMTRAN

We are re-inventing AMTRAN as an innovative organization of empowered individuals who have pulled together and committed themselves to a vision of excellence based on shared values resulting in quality service for the customer and community.

Our success to date is based on the simultaneous implementation of the five tracks of the Lazaro/Noel Focus on Excellence model:

Value-Based Leadership

Team Empowerment

Human Resources

Vision and Strategy

Customer and Community Service.

We believe that the future of community transit demands that we embrace a holistic model for excellence which integrates every element of organizational and community life into the change process.