

Fresh Insights from CTAA's Dale Marsico

Dale Marsico, CTAA's new Executive Director, recently took time out of his busy schedule to describe some of his goals and dreams for CTAA and the community transportation field. The future, according to Marsico, is not in government programs and transit managers approaching Congress and federal agencies with hat in hand. Rather, he envisions a national mobility program spearheaded by flexible, efficient, multi-modal transportation providers — like CTAA members are today.

CTR Magazine : What is community transportation and what is its role today and in the future?

Dale Marsico : Community transportation is for people and their needs. It's the commitment of people to mobility and to access. Access is the solution. And any society that doesn't guarantee access for its people will never be a free society in the 21st century. CTAA's role is to support the commitment that our members have toward community transportation.

Fundamentally, not all people in the United States are going to walk across President Clinton's Bridge to the 21st Century , and not all the people in the next century are going to fit into Mr. Gingrich's belief that everyone will be on the Internet and that the computer will solve all problems. We deal with people who will have to physically either go to a doctor, go to work, go to school, get a job and that's what we are all about.

CTR : Where would this country be without community transportation?

DM : Without transportation, you can't have a free society, period. If you don't have a free society you can't have an economy. If you don't have a free society you don't have a good health care system. If you don't have a free society, you won't have a market that responds to the needs of its people. Instead of arguing about nickels and dimes we ought to be arguing about the global picture. What makes America free? Access.

A democratic society is about choices. If you don't have access, you can't make a choice. How can a welfare recipient choose to leave welfare if they do not have a way to get to a job. How can a person choose good health care if they can't get to the doctors. How can a person choose to maintain their good health if they can't get to the grocery store. How can a person participate in a democratic society if they can't get to the voting polls. The democratic way of life is built on the ability of people to go somewhere, usually by car.

Government spends a lot of time running around telling you how many Americans are alive over the age of 85, but we ought to be focusing on the number of Americans who are over 65 and don't want to get in a car when they are retired and drive 75 miles to try to get to a doctor. We have states that are asking "Should everybody automatically have a driver's license all of their lives?" What about choice? They have no choices.

CTR : You said in a recent speech before the Community Transport Association of Britain that community transportation agencies should stop apologizing for asking for basic human rights to which all Americans are entitled. Would you expand upon this comment?

DM : Members of the Community Transport Association and members of CTAA don't have to apologize to either their elected officials in Congress or in Parliament for going there and saying "I want you to help pay for what is of benefit to society." We don't have to be ashamed for asking government to pay for community transportation. People somehow believe that it is not right for taxpayers to pay for these services. Well, there is a cost for a democratic society.

CTR : We've all been hearing a great deal about welfare reform and the critical role transportation can play in its success. More recently, President Clinton's proposed budget includes a \$100 million line item for transportation solutions to welfare-to-work challenges. How do you see community transportation fitting into welfare reform?

DM : Simply put, without community transportation systems there will not be any welfare reform. How are we going to have welfare reform that doesn't include community transportation in its planning?

From the newspaper virtually every day, to President Clinton's State of the Union address, transportation, at long last, has emerged as an issue in welfare reform. Why? Because we have published a lot information about the issue in here in CTR and in other CTAA publications. And our members have done a great job talking about transportation's key role in the issue.

It should be disturbing to our members and to everybody in the country that someone is going to design a so-called welfare reform strategy and not include a community transportation system up front. These are the kinds of issues that CTAA needs to be talking about. Not only should we be concerned about appropriations, we need to be concerned about the fact that our society will not be successful without access and without community transportation systems in every community.

Everybody is for welfare reform, one way or the other. Everybody wants to lower the cost of government. Community transportation is perfectly situated to be a solution. For example, it costs \$1.86 for a community transportation system trip in Texas for a senior to the doctor. If they don't have access to the doctor for \$1.86, sooner or later they have to get to the doctor through some emergency care which will cost \$400 in an ambulance.

The problem is we are not getting the message out. We're not educating people. So to address this shortcoming, we're now urging that every CTAA member write President Clinton to communicate your eagerness to help both the President and Congress reach their goals in welfare reform — and that you are ready to participate in this effort. All CTAA members should have received a letter recently detailing this important undertaking. Let's let the decision makers know who we are and where we stand.

CTR : So you see education as one of CTAA's most important activities?

DM : Yes, and I think we've done that to a degree; but we're going to give education a higher emphasis. I think thought-provoking articles in CTR support that. A Tale of Two Transit Networks , one for rich people, one for everybody else. Yes, I think these are the kind of issues we need to raise. When our board members came to town last month, they devoted a large amount of time talking with members of Congress. And, not just about ISTEA reauthorization, which is important, but about the issue of mobility and all the other programs that make up community transportation.

CTR : What about the private sector? How does it fit into this solution?

DM : Community transportation needs to find access to the same kind of private financing that built all of these hospitals, nursing facilities and clinics. I think it's there. I think we have to get people interested in it. And with everyone in our country getting older, the private sector is going to take a powerful interest in mobility. And if we equip our members in that transition, then we are going to be major players in that game.

CTR : How many of these ideas come from your experience at Brazos Transit and Community Action Agency?

DM : One of the reasons I wanted to come here was to create a universal transportation system for Americans. But it takes looking beyond the government and the way we have done so in the past.

I was heavy into HMO development issues, and being involved with the health care system and making it as efficient as possible. I wondered, "Why can't we (in transit) be like a managed care system? Why are we afraid of managed care?" The goals of the managed care system are to serve everybody as fast as you can and as many as you can. Cheap, low-overhead, low-cost, low capital investment, dedicated staff ... I looked at what was going on with our community transportation services. Did any of these principles apply? Low overhead, efficient services, very flexible, fully responsible, compassionate, til-the-cows-come-home operators. Same deal.

We have all the ingredients to be as successful, using the same classifications as they do for these advanced managed care productions. We've already got it. We don't need to spend a zillion dollars to study it. We don't need some consultants to come in and reorganize it. We already have the same principles. That's the wave of the future.

Yet instead of celebrating the fact that we are the most efficient transportation system; and that a small investment in us will produce real rewards, we go in and apologize for asking Congress for money when meanwhile we are saving the tax payers a trillion dollars.

CTR : So besides welfare reform, what other trends do you see affecting community transportation and how else can CTAA help the industry and its members?

DM : We need access to Medicare; and for Medicare and Medicaid to pay their fair share of the cost of transporting somebody. We could effectively make the argument that whether or not it was provided in the public sector, the nonprofit sector or the for-profit sector, that we would save the tax payers money as opposed to either the ambulance system or not providing the service.

The other thing we need to do is to find a way to really measure our impact. And not what we do for the Section 15 reports. We need to find out what the cost-savings are to the government each time we provide that trip. But the key to that is to think about it as mobility for a community.

CTR : But Is the community transportation field ready for these changes?

DM : We need to upgrade community transportation through the certification and the loan program. We can have a national impact if we can help our members raise their own standards. CTAA can do it with PASS (Passenger Service and Safety) training and with certification, which help them raise their own standards and help them become more competitive.

The second side of that is financing. One of the other things that I would like to see us do is get more aggressively engaged in innovative financing structures — not another government program. For example, check out some of the changes we are making to CTAA's loan fund (see page 38, this issue) But what we really need is to link our people to innovative financing opportunities in the private sector.