Pennsylvania: Transportation for the Common Good

by Scott Bogren

Several of our original states were created as commonwealths at their founding — states like Virginia, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. This historic political term defines a government whose principle purpose is to serve the common good of all its people. In Pennsylvania the notion of commonwealth is more than just a historic anecdote, it is alive and well and exemplified by the state's expansive public and community transportation network.

Pennsylvania has a storied history in public transportation. Its' largest public transportation system, the Southeast Pennsylvania Public Transportation Authority (SEPTA) is built upon rail lines and busways and is the third largest transit operation in the country. Pittsburgh's Port Authority was created in the mid 1960s from a network of private trolley and bus operators and is historically linked to horse drawn rail systems begun well over 150 years ago.

In building its transportation commonwealth Pennsylvania expanded the traditional definitions of public transportation to include cities smaller than Pittsburgh or Philadelphia and in the last 25 years expanded this definition further to include smaller urban and rural communities. The state is currently pursuing a number of demonstrations to further close any service gaps for those with as yet unmet transportation needs.

Public and community transportation in Pennsylvania is hallmarked by innovative service, generous federal and state investment and visionary leadership. The legacy of the commonwealth's storied transportation past bears fruit today as Pennsylvania transit operators enjoy a number of innovative state transit investment programs.

The Lottery Program

America's commitment to public and community transportation was codified in 1998 with the passage of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). In the ensuing years, investment in public and community transportation at the federal, state and local levels has reached new records, as has ridership.

We've been listening, talking, reading and writing about transit's future in recent months and here's our version of what we've heard, distilled into four major themes.

Getting People to the Doctor

In 1983, officials with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW), including the Secretary of Welfare, became aware that they had little control over transportation spending within the Medicaid program. What's worse, they had no control over the quality or safety of the trips. The Medical Assistance Transportation Program (MATP) was hatched to handle these issues.

"They (DPW) decided to allow transit providers to design a system that would serve their recipients, and then to make it work," recalls CTAA Board President Rex Knowlton of long-time medical transportation service Wheels, Inc., in Philadelphia. "What's best, they decided to use existing transit providers."

At the beginning of the MATP program, much of the service was in either Philadelphia or Pittsburgh. But with time, the program has come to serve the entire state.

"Last year, for the first time, Philadelphia actually received less than half of the MATP budget," says Knowlton. The program's record budget this year is more than $50 mi

More State Investment in Transit

These two innovative programs — the Shared Ride and MATP — did not evolve in a vacuum. As transit grew to meet increasing need throughout the state in the 1970s and '80s, state investment through the general fund grew accordingly.

"The modern era of public and community transportation in Pennsylvania was created by steady federal and state investment combined with innovative programs like Shared Ride and MATP," says Pennsylvania Public Transportation Association President Armand Greco, who is also executive director of the Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority in Allentown.

State general funds remain a crucial part of most transit system's operating budgets across the commonwealth. Last year, Pennsylvania invested $260 million in general funds for operating assistance in urban areas, and $2.6 million in rural communities. And in 1997, state transit and highway interests banded together to create what operators call Act 3 money which comes from a gas tax. In 2000, Act 3 money contributed another $70 million in state investment.

Building for the Future

The Beaver County Transit Authority is an apt place to begin a public and community transit journey through Pennsylvania, for it is set to celebrate the grand opening of its Expressway Travel Center in Aliquippa in less than a weeks' time.

Located north and west of downtown Pittsburgh and bi-sected by the Ohio River, Beaver County is transitioning from a more independent area to becoming a part of the greater Pittsburgh region. A majority of its residents now work in the more urban Allegheny County and Beaver County Transit finds itself increasingly linking to the large-urban Port Authority of Allegheny County (Pittsburgh's transit system). Growth in Beaver County is greatest in the Highway 60 corridor, which perhaps not surprisingly links the county with the Greater Pittsburgh International Airport (a US Airways hub).

The new facility, which General Manager Mary Jo Morandini describes as "curvalinear" is ideally placed along this evolving corridor and is an expansive, modern building designed to elevate the system's image and services within the community — as well as house the system's 60 vehicles. In fact, it already has.

Beaver County contracts for both its fixed-route and paratransit services — it does not operate any vehicles nor employ any drivers. The agency was chartered in 1980 as non-operating, and annually negotiates contracts for both fixed-route and paratransit services.

"Three years ago, once we knew that this facility was going to be built, prospective contractors for our service became much more competitive. We even got the attention of national firms, and last February we selected First Transit to provide both fixed-route and paratransit services for the county," says Morandini.

"This new facility consolidates the maintenance, operations and customer service aspects of Beaver County Transit under a single roof," says David Stragar, First Transit's operations manager in Beaver County. "The location is also key, as it's right along the burgeoning Highway 60 corridor."

Beaver County's $14million Expressway Travel Center was paid for with a combination of congressional earmarks, flexible federal investment (largely from the Congestion Mitigation and Surface Transportation funds), federal formula money and state dedicated transit money and bond investment. Morandini is quick to note that without the help of U.S. Senators Santorum and Specter and Rep. Melissa Hart the new facility would never have been built.

In addition to centralizing several important functions, the new facility helps Beaver County develop its personnel. Several new positions, including a safety/training coordinator, a road supervisor and a maintenance superintendent, are also part of the upgrade that comes along with First Transit. In late November a complete customer service center will move into the gleaming building.

"The new facility breeds service improvements because it centralizes everything. We'll even be able to begin our concept of becoming mobility managers for our riders," says Morandini. "It will allow us to work more closely with employers in the airport corridor."

Indeed, Beaver County has plans to incorporate automatic vehicle location software and mobile data terminals on-board each of its buses — offering passengers real-time schedule information. There are plans to build in trip itinerary services and even traffic and weather information in coming months.

But as much as the new facility offers to Beaver County in terms of streamlining its services, its greatest impact might be on the county's economy. The building is 15 minutes from the airport, and is central to an effort to rejuvenate a shopping area. A strip mall stands vacant beside the new Travel Center, with the exception of a grocery store at the far end. A McDonald's restaurant is out by the entrance to the center's park and ride lot. According to Morandini the grocery would have left the strip mall bereft, if not for the plans to build the transit facility.

"We envision eventually locating a daycare center right next to the transit facility," says Morandini. "And we're also looking at a dry cleaner, a news stand or a fitness center."

The concept of regionalism is one that Morandini and Beaver County Transit believe is key to their future. The new transit center facilitates this notion by providing passengers with more seamless connections to Pittsburgh's Port Authority service via the West Side Busway and several other

Beaver County's vehicles are adorned with the phrase: "Fast. Forward." And its obvious that everyone at the agency and its First Transit contractors are eager to move both fast and forward in bringing first-class transit to county residents. The new facility goes a long way in making this statement a reality.

Going Home

"This is home," says Westmoreland County Transit Authority's Executive Director Larry Morris. A native of nearby Monroeville, Morris returned home in 1993 after stints in Texas and Florida. It was a return about which he was at first a little reticent, but now finds satisfying.

"We serve all the way from downtown Pittsburgh to Johnstown, so covering the county and our residents' needs is a challenge," says Morris. "But our board and staff has always been committed to serving everyone."

Upon arrival, Morris took stock of the system and saw both short-term and long-term changes that he felt needed to be instituted. The culture he entered was highly risk averse, though some change was clearly needed.

"My first couple of years were spent developing additional operating dollars and securing new equipment for the agency," recalls Morris. "What I came to here was a well-run, functioning transit system that had an established history in the county. But there was also this 'we tried that once and it didn't work' mentality."

Westmoreland County officials had taken over its public and community transportation services from private carriers in 1978 by creating the authority. But much as is the case in Beaver County, the authority was prohibited from operating vehicles directly. Through much of the 1980s and '90s, ridership was steady on the county's fixed-route, commuter and paratransit services. Locally, the transit service was known for its friendly nature; tickets were sold on the buses and drivers would happily make change for passengers.

"Sometimes when we'd have a new rider, a dispatcher would make a special call to the driver to look out for the new person," recalls Westmoreland Transit's Director of Planning and Marketing Lori Brkovich. "In all of the changes we've made, we've tried to keep that customer-friendly ethic."

It was a system of very distinct ridership groups. The commuter market was composed, largely, of married, professional women en route to Pittsburgh and their office jobs. Transit dependent residents tended to utilize Westmoreland County's rural service, as did senior citizens. The paratransit system served the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) market, as well as the state's Shared-Ride and MATP programs.

"When I got here I knew we needed a service change," says Morris. "And we wanted to make changes, but we lacked the investment to do it until the Act 3 state money became available to us in 1997. All of a sudden we had the funds to re-make the system the way we wanted."

Over the years, according to Morris, the service itself had changed very little. Transfers were inordinately difficult and too many people thought the system was the senior bus, even though commuter riders heading into Pittsburgh were a staple of the agency and student ridership was growing. In fact, during the mid-1990s senior riders had slipped from 60 percent to 40 percent of the agency's overall passengers.

Data collection under the old service model was a nightmare. With two fixed-route and seven taxicab contractors providing the actual transit service in Westmoreland County — each with varying and often incompatible methods of data collection — it was arduous for Morris and his staff to secure actual ridership data under the old system.

But perhaps the greatest reason of all to change is summed up by Morris who laughs and shakes his head as he proclaims: "I had trouble reading the bus schedules!"

Beginning in 1998, Morris and Brkovich set about redesigning the entire Westmoreland County transit service. They sought to develop a new service plan that they thought really met the community's needs, that offered coordinated transfers and that linked the community together.

"Larry made it clear that service cuts and fare increases were not part of this redesign," says Brkovich. "And we had to use our current equipment."

To ensure that the redesign process was systemic, Morris brought together internal teams of drivers and other staff members, he involved senior and commuter riders. What emerged was a comprehensive plan that met all of their goals — and was financially impossible to implement.

"Once we took into account money, the plan we were developing was not realistic, so we had to decide what to cut back on and where," says Morris.

Today's Westmoreland County Transit Authority service is much simpler. Timed transfers every two hours at the agency's headquarters in Greensburg, Pa. (the bottom level of a four-story parking garage the agency moved into in 1991) allows riders to go virtually anywhere they want in the county. And ridership responded to the new service design with a nearly 14 percent increase in passengers the first year.

Local residents and the system Board of Directors were thrilled with the redesign.

 "Our challenge is trying to provide public and community transportation that people will use and that is competitive with the automobile. And we need to provide this service in the same friendly manner in which we've always," says Morris. "There's a sense of community here locally that I recall from my childhood, and we've been accepted into the community."

The Northern Empire

North of just about everything in the state of Pennsylvania, far closer to Buffalo, N.Y., than Philadelphia, resides the rural transit empire known as the Area Transit Authority (ATA). The six-county region the ATA serves in north central Pennsylvania is one of the largest rural areas in the Northeast U.S. But it's more small-town rural, as opposed to a big, vast rural like, say, South Dakota.

"This is a unique place to provide effective public transportation, You've got six counties, 5,000 square miles and some 156 municipalities" says ATA CEO Michael Imbrogno. He should know, having been with the agency since its inception 25 years ago.

The main ATA facility (there are two satellite offices in Bradford and DuBois) sits imposingly alongside state highway 219, just north of Johnsonburg. The large brick building with stone arches and soaring "ATA" logo lets everyone know that this is a professional, state-of-the-art operation. And the facility's interior, highlighted by generous use of sturdy Pennsylvania oak columns, does not disappoint, either.

Curiously, Imbrogno's office and desk don't seem to fit their surroundings. Sitting in a standard folding chair and behind a makeshift desk that's really just a table, Imbrogno smiles broadly when he talks about the early days with ATA.

The Appalachian Regional Council jump started what is now the Area Transit Authority back in 1975 with a $25,000 grant intended to study the feasibility of providing transportation to such a large area. Imbrogno, who at the time worked for the regional planning commission, found himself addressing the question: Is there a mobility problem in rural Pennsylvania. The answer he found was "yes," and he still remembers the exact date: May 19, 1976.

But it wasn't just that easy. Imbrogno recalls that they needed enough money to get a van to start the program and actually provide trips. His boss at the regional planning commission told him there was no additional funding available, and that one of the agency's three staff members would have to go in order to purchase the vehicle. Before Imbrogno could finish his, "one of us has to go" talk with his colleagues, Carol, the secretary, quickly chimed in, "I guess I'll see you later."

"Shortly thereafter, we hired her back," says Imbrogno.

The ATA was an original Section 147 grantee, and then Section 18 grantee. It received the first rural transit operating grant in the state of Pennsylvania. Then, in 1982, the state's Shared Ride Program kicked in further boosting the agency's funding. Today, the agency is funded by an innovative mix of state, local and federal funds. Imbrogno is quick to point out that the facility in Johnsonburg was funded completely with state tax revenues and a 30-year bank loan.

Today, ATA serves its' nearly 400,000 annual riders with 85 vehicles running along 106 routes. The service types the agency offers include fixed route, fixed-route deviation, demand response and other special-purpose routes.

The vehicle fleet, consisting largely of Orion IIs, is 100 percent accessible, and 16 of the buses are CNG-fueled. ATA operates a CNG fueling station at its Johnsonburg headquarters.

"We didn't get much money to go the CNG route," says Imbrogno. "But with it (CNG) so prevalent up here, it seemed like the right thing to do for the community."

Technology is the crucial next step in ATA's evolution. Imbrogno and his staff are committed to taking advantage of technological advancements to offer better services to customers.

"In our area, anything we can do to reduce our costs and make us more efficient, we'll look closely at," says Imbrogno.

Currently, ATA is still employing two-way radios as the main source of communications between vehicles and dispatchers in any of the system's facilities. Such radios represent outdated technology, and ATA staff estimates that as much as 40 percent of their service area is out of radio range due to the steep hills and woods. Cell phone service, in case you're wondering, offers even worse coverage in the vastness of the six-county region.

"I have to give a tremendous amount of credit to our dispatchers and drivers," says Imbrogno. "That we've never had a serious injury or even an incident because of a vehicle breakdown out of radio range is testimony to the great work of these people."

Using a $60,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, ITS money from the Federal Transit Administration and funds from the regional planning commission, ATA staff are looking at

deploying a mobile data system to be built off a statewide communications system that is the pet project of the governor. Imbrogno hopes to have ATA ready to take advantage of what he calls the "state radio system" by accessing both the voice and data capabilities of the new network. Eventually, he hopes the agency will have mobile data terminals in each vehicle, GIS locating software and equipment and more.

"We've already developed a wireless LAN between our three facilities," says Imbrogno. "Our system's safety will be much enhanced with this technology because we'll know where our people and vehicles are — and we'll be able to communicate with them via voice or data."

All of this technology will undoubtedly provide ATA with additional system data heretofore unavailable. To house this new technology/data arm of the operation, Imbrogno and the ATA Board of Directors have authorized the completion of the Johnsonburg facility's second story. Once finished, this new section of the building will be home to the data collection and reporting functions, as well as offer a new office from Imbrogno.

Will the old folding chair and table grace this new spacious office?

"From whence I came, I shall go," laughs Imbrogno.

Serving Seniors… and More

Blair County is in the center of Pennsylvania, and is a region known for transportation. The famed Horseshoe Curve, which was built in 1845 by the Pennsylvania Railroad and helped engineers understand how to traverse steep grades with rails, is a few miles west of Altoona — the county seat.

The county is also home to Blair Senior Services, an offshoot of the local Area Agency on Aging that provides transportation for seniors and people with disabilities.

"That's the only thing we do," says Blair's Bill Davis. "We serve the entire county with a fully accessible, easy to use service."

Located in Holidaysburg, a small town to the east of Altoona, the agency's headquarters is a low-slung warehouse-like building nearby a highway overpass and next to a set of little-used rail tracks. From this obscure location — county property into which the operation moved in 1992 — Davis and his staff provide more than 165,000 annual trips with their fleet of 33 fully accessible body-on-chassis vans, each of which seats no more than 14.

"The business here is transportation," says Davis, "but what we really do is try to keep people in their own homes."

This customer-driven philosophy is paying dividends, as last month Blair County Senior Services broke a one-day record by making 700 trips in a single day.

Not surprisingly, the financial backbone of the program is Pennsylvania's Shared-Ride program, which pays 85 percent of any trip for people aged 65 and over. Currently, the Lottery Program accounts for more than 60 percent of the system's funds. Blair County Senior Services' transit program was launched in 1975 with a couple of vans for which the agency contracted.

"We recognized right from the start (the agency opened its doors in 1974) that there was a need for transportation for this county's seniors," says Blair Senior Services Executive Director David Slat. In 1986 the agency took over the responsibility for providing transportation directly.

Through the ensuing years, Davis and his staff have sought to diversify the agency's funding by providing contract service. Rounding out the system's budget today are funds from the MATP program, a number of social service contracts — for example, the agency transports 25 children with disabilities daily to eight different schools — and the complementary paratransit contract with Amtran (Altoona's public transportation provider). These additional contracts increase vehicle usage and thus allow Davis to serve more people more often.

"We have a great relationship with Blair County Senior Services," confirms Amtran's General Manager Eric Wolf. "They do a great job with our complementary paratransit and I know we're fortunate to have such a conscientious contractor."

"We're here to serve people in town and in the county's rural areas," says Davis, who has been with the program from its beginnings.

A big job for Davis and his staff is rider education. They regularly visit the county's nine senior centers and local church groups to provide hands-on training to potential riders, which Davis thinks is the system's best marketing tool. They've also employed a local cable access television program.

"I've found that the best way for us to increase ridership is to focus on being responsive to the passengers and the community," says Davis. "The more responsive we are, the better our service is."

Davis recognizes the critical relationship his operation has with the actual Area Agency on Aging. Last year, the Blair Senior Service transportation program accounted for just less than one-quarter of the AAA's overall budget. But he notes that it is a mutually beneficial relationship as his vehicles are a highly visible service that AAA officials know sells well with local politicians.

"Besides," says Davis, "they understand our crucial role because without us, many people couldn't get to the AAA's outstanding programs."

Slat agrees: "Transportation is the glue the keeps our programs going and is an absolute key to seniors' independence.

Still, it's sometimes difficult to schedule all of these trips, particularly when medical sites or even AAA-sponsored programs strike inflexible stances with regard to scheduling. Each senior center schedules at least two or three special events a month, on top what each is already doing.

"A little flexibility can go a long way," acknowledges Davis.

Regionally Speaking

Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley is home to three cities: Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton. Located 80 miles north of Philadelphia, these three cities represent both the past and present for the state. Once

known individually for their industrial might, the three cities (combined, a population of more than 600,000) are currently transitioning into a single region more known for its light industry, technology and service sectors. It's not always been a smooth transformation

This economic passage is nowhere more evident than it is in Bethlehem, where the decaying shell of Bethlehem Steel's enormous mills slumbers next to the Lehigh River like a cadaver. There's word locally that the Smithsonian Institute may purchase the mills to create a national industrial museum. But only a few days after my visit, Bethlehem Steel filed for Chapter 11.

The region's recent growth is as much a testament to its location as anything else. Centrally located along the East Coast corridor, local residents have easy access to Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore and Washington. Technology, health care and education (the region is home to numerous colleges and universities), along with a growth in light industry, have spurred population growth and improved economic times.

Amidst all of this talk of regional growth, industry and viability, the Lehigh and Northhampton Transportation Authority (LANTA) serves as a model for regional service. The authority was created in 1972 from the ashes of a failing private public transportation that had served the region since the early part of the 20th Century. At its zenith, the Lehigh Valley Transit Company provided 50 million trips to local residents in 1950. By 1972, the same system made less than 3 million annual trips. And though its' usage may never rival the 1950 numbers, LANTA is steadily building ridership

"We're now seeing a very positive passenger trend here," says LANTA Executive Director Armand Greco, who has been with the system since 1977. "Ridership has increased each of the last five years."

From its inception, LANTA was a regional enterprise as the three city's municipal planning organization worked together to plan and zone. These leaders also put some resources to the process. The resulting service has grown to include paratransit, and even rural transit services in nearby Carbon County to the north.

"They realized almost 30 years ago that transit would be a regional issue," says LANTA's Dennis Myers, who began with the agency in 1975. "The real coordination happened at the county level, which is good because we have only two counties (Lehigh and Northhampton) to work with as opposed to 62 separate municipalities."

Today, LANTA's service is much changed from its original design. Though there remains some strong employment centers in the three cities' downtown areas, job growth, shopping opportunities and health care centers are in the suburbs. Better than half the trips LANTA makes are destined for areas outside the urban areas — though the cities may be where the transfers take place.

"We operate much like a large suburban community service," says Greco. "Many riders begin in the urban areas, but end up elsewhere."

To meet riders' needs, LANTA has recently constructed a parking garage facility in Bethlehem that offers an ideal transfer point for passengers. In Allentown, a three-part transfer, parking and private development facility is underway.

"We'd like to continue to be a multi-modal as possible," says Greco. "And we'd also like to continue to be a part of the redevelopment efforts currently underway in Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton."

Much of the service changes, and the overall change in the agency's focus, occurred in the aftermath of disastrous economic conditions in the 1980s when a vast majority of the region's industrial jobs vanished. The current LANTA Metro system, which includes the agency's 28 fixed-route bus service and 75 buses, was launched in June of 1986. The system was redesigned to be more customer friendly, and among the changes were newly color-coded routes and schedules. The route structure was largely familiar to passengers, though some were combined.

"We knew that most folks on our vehicles were working hard just to get to work, to become productive members of the community" says Greco. " We felt, and feel, these people deserved the best possible service."

TheMetro Plus paratransit program also took root around this time. Currently, LANTA operates a specialized transit brokerage that meets the system's ADA requirements and fulfills contracts with the MAT) and Shared Ride programs — among others. LANTA brokers with two local carriers, Palmeri and the Valley Association for Specialized Transportation (VAST), which LANTA helped form back in 1977 to meet the growing transportation needs of the region's people with disabilities and senior citizens.

"We knew we needed to do paratransit well," says Greco. "It (paratransit) was something the community was very interested in."

Since the inception of the Metro Plus brokerage there has been a 30 percent increase in paratransit usage. The agency uses four separate locations for scheduling and dispatching operations.

"We're the gatekeeper. We determine eligibility and then assign passengers to the appropriate carrier," says Myers.

These days in the Lehigh Valley, public and community transportation, as operated by LANTA, is seen as a viable investment by local elected officials.

Greco and his staff hope to offer local residents increased service levels in the near future, including more frequent vehicles, expanded commuter routes and better intermodal connections to New York City and Philadelphia. Also, they know that the paratransit operation will continue to grow.

"What we're dealing with now here is a crisis of expectations," says Greco, "Which is pretty good considering there were times when it didn't look like we'd be able to continue operations."

Pulling a Rabbit Out of a Hat

York is in southern Pennsylvania not far from the Maryland border and is a city and county steeped in historical significance. From September 1777 to July 1778, the Continental Congress occupied the city's two-story, red brick courthouse as they fled the British. Nearly 90 years later, in 1863, York County marked the northern-most advance of the Army of Northern Virginia, which later consolidated in neighboring Adams County in preparation for a battle in Gettysburg.

In such a historic area, it might seem odd to find a bright red transit van with a frisky rabbit-logo on its side and, yes, a fluffy white tail on its backside. But sure enough, there it is.

The man behind these cute red vans, and similarly decked out larger buses is Steve Bland, executive director of Rabbittransit in York and CTAA's 2001 Community Transportation Manager of the Year. But don't let the lovable image fool you, this is as professionals and efficient a public and community transportation as one is likely to see anywhere and an apt system to close out this journey across the Keystone State.

York, at a population of 45,000, is a quickly growing community. The population has jumped 12 percent in the past decade.

Today's Rabbittransit was, up until 1990, two separate agencies that didn't always exactly get along. Back then, the York Transportation Club (led by one of community transportation's legendary figures — Pat Flinchbaugh) and the York Area Transportation Authority were both struggling financially. The former served rural residents and people with disabilities, while the latter was the city's fixed-route bus system.

In 1990 Rabbittransit's predecessor, Community Transit, was formed when a set of county commissioners threatened to withhold local matching funds unless the two agencies merged. The environment for transit was particularly difficult at this time because many of the counties 72 municipalities were threatening to withdraw financial support. Needless to say, the merger occurred in May 1990, with the county commissioners demanding, among other things, that the new system serve the entire county.

Community Transit moved beyond this transition period as was, by most accounts, a successful public and community transportation operation. Yet Bland, who was named executive director in February 1994, thought there was a lot more potential.

In 1996 the system, according to Bland, "bottomed out." Cuts in federal funds and a state operating assistance reduction led to staff and service scale backs.

"These negative times, however, created opportunity," recalls Bland. And in the next year TEA-21's passage and the state's adopting the 1997 Act 3 program greatly boosted investment in Community Transit. Suddenly, the system had sufficient funds to increase service and try to really address the growing transportation needs of the York, the city and county. But it was at this time that Bland strategically paused, and decided to evaluate some of the system's image in the community.

"In 1998 we decided to measure what people in the community — riders and non-riders — wanted from their transportation system," says Bland. " We simply asked people what they'd like."

Through a series of town hall meetings, community gatherings, random phone surveys, on-board surveys and mail questionnaires, as well as detailed meetings with community leaders from local politics and business, Bland and his staff learned that people wanted more transit service, particularly on weekends and during the evenings. They learned that some of their routes needed reworking. But most of all, they learned that few people even knew that Community Transit existed. Of the random phone surveys, less than one in three residents could accurately name the agency.

"We learned about this problem at a great time," recollects Bland. "We had additional money coming through our state and federal grants, so we were adding service. Much of our fleet was scheduled to be replaced (some 67 buses) and we'd just received a Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality grant of $600,000 for promotions."

The ad agency that Bland and his staff contracted with devised a program to rev up the system's image, and used Rabbittransit as a sample idea in its proposal. They advised going with a marketing program that was a complete departure from what had been done in the past. They also proposed an "impact red" as a new color scheme. It wasn't meant to be the idea, but the concept seemed to grow on everyone. Bland test marketed the name in focus groups and he smiles and says, "everyone loved it!"

As the ad agency introduced the concept to the transit system's Board of Directors, Bland stood back on purpose to gauge the initial reaction, he was not surprised to hear people asking: "No really, what is the idea?" Some members thought it too outlandish for a conservative community like York. It was a first reaction Bland had seen in other arenas, so he wasn't too surprised. But then a member of the Board, Tim Polk stood up and said, "I just think this is great." From there, the once outlandish idea began to happen.

As part of the marketing strategy, the ad agency placed billboard advertisements around the community that obtusely asked: "How Do You Ride a Rabbit?" During this time just before the unveiling and with these curious billboards piquing everyone's curiosity, Bland attended a regular meeting of the local Rotary Club and at the end of his presentation he noted the billboards and said he'd soon have a great surprise for everyone.

"Everyone looked at me and then said in unison, 'It's You!'" remembers Bland.

In addition to having all of the new buses painted in the new color scheme, Bland and his staff had held off on painting many of the systems rolling stock for several years so that the entire fleet could transform to Rabbittransit overnight. In July 2000, the former Community Transit became Rabbittransit.

"It had taken six or seven years for the staff and ideologies of York Transit Club and the York Area Transportation Authority to really come together, but this change to Rabbittransit really brought us all together," says Bland. Everyone on the staff liked the new look and the drivers especially appreciated the new uniforms which consist of golf shirts and shorts or slacks rather than what Bland termed "Ralph Cramden-style" uniforms.

The impact on the community was immediate. The agency was inundated with phone calls. How was it that they were operating so many more vehicles that they had before? In fact there were no more buses and vans on the streets of York City and County than before. Other callers requested bus schedules for what they thought was the new bus service or route that passed in front of their home; when actually a bus had been running there all along. Some people would even sidle up to Bland at community functions and deride the staff of Community Transit which obviously didn't really know what it was doing, not knowing that the staff was unchanged.

"Thank you for buying them (Community Transit) out," people would say.

For the year following the introduction of Rabbittransit, ridership on fixed route service jumped 7.5 percent, and 11 percent on paratransit. Some of the agency's routes saw immediate riderhship increases of 15 percent to 20 percent.

"Ease of use on the entire system is now a key focus for us," says Bland. "We're working to develop a real-time passenger information system and redesigning all of our public information. It's not enough to be convenient, people have to think we're convenient."

As part of this increased priority put on ease of use, the system opened a new transfer facility in downtown York in October, 2000. Located at the site of an old rail head and nearby a number of parks and the city's canal system, the $1.7 million transfer facility offers the system even more visibility locally and was built with 80 percent federal investment.

"This facility adds to our service in that many of our routes connect here and it offers shelter and a nice environment in which to wait for a bus," says Bland.

Bland realizes that Rabbittransit's success has far more to do with increasing service to the community and building the county's trust than it does painting little white bunny tails on the back of his vans.

"Everything just happened to happen at the right time for us, but this wasn't completely by accident," says Bland. "The timing was well orchestrated, but gimmicks will only get you so far. The bottom line is always the quality of the service you provide and I'm very fortunate to work with a bunch of professionals who come to work everyday with one goal in mind: serving the people of York."

Closing the Gap

Even with all of this outstanding public and community transportation service being provided throughout the Keystone State, perhaps the most impressive concept of all is that the state and its operators are constantly seeking to offer more and better service.

To wit, last year, the state launched a new pilot transit investment program aimed at what Knowlton calls, "gappers." In many rural areas of the state, people with disabilities were slipping through the cracks of Pennsylvania's considerable transit infrastructure.

"There wasn't always enough paratransit service to serve them, and there was no ADA complementary service nearby," says LaVerne Collins. "This pilot project is designed to provide gap transportation service to people with disabilities that matches the Lottery service, kind of extending the Shared Ride program — but it's not funded out of the lottery."

With a $3 million one-year budget, providers in the pilot counties (York, Cumberland, Schukyll, Washington, Greene, Elk, Cameron and Clearfield) are collecting data they hope will prove the necessity of transforming this pilot into an ongoing program.

"There were just too many Pennsylvanians who are not 65 and don't have access to fixed-route transit, but have a disability and need mobility options," explains Steve Bland of Rabbittransit in York, one of the participating agencies. "This pilot addresses this need and we hope it's just the beginning."

Clearly, Pennsylvania vigorously supports and invests in its public and community transportation network. But it's more than funding, history or geography that makes public transportation thrive in Pennsylvania. If nothing else, my visit proved once again that the people of public and community transportation, in this state and around the nation, are the heart of the matter. The managers, directors, contractors, dispatchers, marketers, drivers and advocates of public and community transportation in the Keystone State are exceptional examples of model public servants. They have much to be proud of; and it was my pleasure to spend some time in their company.