

Community Transportation on Vacation: A Critical Service to Tourists and Locals Alike

With the arrival of summer, so too arrives the vacation season. But community transportation never rests. In fact, some providers become quite busy as the weather heats up. Here's a look at community transportation agencies operating in resort/tourism areas and how they cope with the sudden influx of visitors.

by Scott Bogren

Imagine. Working at the beach; or at a ski resort town. Living where the rest of us vacation. Sounds pleasant, right? But for community transportation operators, it's also a lot of work.

Providing transportation in Cape Cod, Mass., or Park City, Utah is most certainly a mixed blessing. In addition to the usual markets (commuters, people with disabilities, senior citizens, students, et al) such transportation systems must market and provide services to visitors. In some cases these tourism trips help fund other local transportation services while in others the system has been designed solely to transport vacationers.

Park City Transit

The sunny days of summer are not the prime tourism season in Park City, Utah. The breathtaking mountains and world-reknowned skiing, coupled with the area's proximity to Salt Lake City, make Park City one of the most popular winter resorts in the country. From mid-November to late April skiers take over the town, swelling the approximate 8,000 year-round residents to nearly 25,000 on peak weekends. The transit system was launched explicitly to help skiers get to the slopes.

The second largest transit system in Utah, Park City's annual ridership is just less than 1 million. During the summer months, however, ridership slows to 20 percent of the winter season and the agency has a third of the vehicles in operation.

"Our system is faced with ridership patterns that are seasonally inconsistent," says Park City Transportation Director Hope Bleecker, "The only service that operates year-round is the our ADA paratransit van."

With visitors being a primary target, special marketing efforts are necessary. To generate ridership, the system works closely with local radio and television stations. Close attention is paid to local hotels and the chamber of commerce. Making sure

hotel clerks and concierges understand how the system works is crucial. The fact that parking is quite scarce also helps augment ridership.

"About 90 percent of our effort is dedicated to transporting tourists," says Bleecker.

Year-round residents would like to have an alternative to their cars, especially to go into town, but they don't want large buses travelling along fixed routes clogging their neighborhoods. A demand-response community bus fits the bill and is in the works.

With most of its financial support generated from two different quarter-cent sales taxes, which tourism generates, the system is largely paid for by visitors. In effect, then, the resort trips help subsidize the agency's employment and paratransit trips. The system operates without charging fares.

But as Park City's year-round population grows swiftly (as it has in recent years), many residents would like to see the transit system more effectively serve their needs as opposed to merely ferrying vacationers and employees up to the ski trails.

"We're becoming well-known as a livable city for retirees and even telecommuters," says Bleecker. "But the orientation of our routes prohibits many residents from easy access to the bus system."

For this reason, the city is now investigating the feasibility of demand-response transit and neighborhood park and ride centers. Year-round residents would like to have an alternative to their cars, especially to go into town, but they don't want large buses travelling along fixed routes clogging their neighborhoods. A demand-response community bus fits the bill and is in the works.

Local officials and residents alike are extremely wary of building large parking lots and encouraging increased automobile traffic to their small town. The easiest answer to how to reduce automobile congestion and traffic in the commercial downtown area is increased parking - - perhaps a large parking structure. There is little sentiment for this solution.

"The area is very pro-transit," says Bleecker. "We don't want parking spaces and automobiles to overrun the town."

In 2002, Park City expects to be overrun -- with Olympic athletes and fans. The Winter Games will be held in Salt Lake City in six years and all of the alpine skiing and snowboarding events are slated for Park City. Early estimates place the daily population increase at more than 40,000 for each day of the events. Park City Transit is already preparing.

"Transit's going to have a huge role in making those events a success," says Bleecker. "The majority of downtown is going to be shut off to cars."

Perhaps as a precursor to 2002 when cars will be banned, the transit agency has come up with an ABC (Anything But Cars) day scheduled for later this summer. The system, with the help of the city council and mayor among others, hopes to raise awareness about the important role of public transportation in making Park City a vibrant community.

Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority

In the summer months, thousands of New Englanders flock to Atlantic Ocean retreats in Cape Cod, Mass. With its famed classic homes and picturesque beaches, the Cape is accessible only by either bridge or ferry. Needless to say, excess automobiles pose a real congestion problem, in addition to taking away from the resort's charm.

The Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority (CCRTA), located in Dennis, Mass., faces a summer onslaught of tourists, many of whom depend upon it for mobility, coupled with the needs of year-round residents. The CCRTA operates fixed-route trolley bus service in the summer months and Cape-wide demand-response service for residents year round.

"During the summer months our ridership is split 50-50 between tourists and residents," says CCRTA's Administrator Joe Potzka. "Accordingly, we operate a separate summer service and schedule."

Because the summer service targets vacationers, the agency uses special trolley buses along 10 shuttle routes which range from beach routes to shopping trips. The trolleys give the service a fun, tourism flair.

"We've found that the trolleys really boost ridership," says Potzka. "They're easier to see and they definitely promote the system."

The Cape consists of many small towns. The CCRTA works with the chambers of commerce of many of these towns to schedule and organize the trolley and demand-response service. Members of the chambers of commerce serve on the steering committees of each of the vehicles; these steering committees promote and publicize the trolleys and even sell tokens and passes. It's all part of making the CCTRA more responsive to the communities it serves.

Congestion is not such a dire problem once on the Cape; but it can make a trip to the beach miserable for many New Englanders. During peak summer weekends, traffic often backs up seven to eight miles to get to Cape Cod. To combat this,

CCRTA is working to re-launch regular transit service from the mainland. Today, Amtrak's weekend train service is the only public transportation available.

"There used to be regular train and bus service, but when the state had financial troubles, they cut it," recalls Potzka.

Several ferries operate from Boston, Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket and New Bedford. However, automobiles go along for the ride and relatively few people arrive on the Cape without cars. There are no restrictions on automobiles, either, like those on Martha's Vineyard.

With traffic getting to the Cape such a problem, and because it only serves the towns within the island, CCRTA concentrates its marketing efforts within its service area. The agency promotes itself largely through regional booklets and guides, as well as in local newspapers and on the radio. And ridership is growing.

Says Potzka: "We're experimenting with a regular fixed-route that will run throughout the year."

Though the system's summer month ridership is much greater than that the rest of the year, it still does not fully support CCRTA's year-round activities. Many of the summer trolley routes were started with Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funding through ISTEA (see pages 22-24). These grants fund routes for up to two years, upon which time a decision can be made whether or not to continue the service.

The summer trolley routes generate farebox revenue -- the standard fare is 50 cents -- as does vehicle advertising, but not enough to sustain CCRTA on a year-round basis.

"We generate needed revenue, but it's only part of what we need to continue operating," says Potzka.

A Crucial Role

The role of public transportation in vacation areas is two-fold. First, it is to move tourists safely and conveniently to their destinations, be it the beach or ski slopes. Second, the system needs to serve year-round residents effectively.

In the case of both Park City and Cape Cod, seasonal tourism patterns play a significant role in their service design and delivery. Both agencies are able to augment their paratransit and year-round service through farebox and tax revenue generated by visitors.

Also in both cases, the local chambers of commerce and city councils have clearly recognized the critical role transportation can play in attracting and keeping tourists. Transit helps streamline congestion and allows Park City and Cape Cod to maintain their authentic look and feel, key aspects in many tourists decision to travel. So even though the setting may be beautifully enticing, the role of transportation remains the same.