

# Taking SMART to the People

by Scott Bogren

In 1994, on the Friday before Christmas, a phone call from a state department of transportation official forever changed the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) in Detroit, Mich. That afternoon, state officials let SMART know that an anticipated immediate and long-term state transit funding proposal for southeastern Michigan would not be realized; without which, the immediate future for the agency looked bleak. "It was a pretty clear signal that something had to change," recalls Dan Dirks, a 23-year SMART employee who was named General Manager on October 1. "We decided, (under the leadership of then-General Manager Mike Duggan) to focus our transportation efforts on three markets: seniors, people with disabilities and jobs. But first we had to keep the system going."

The ensuing four years have seen the agency overwhelmingly win dedicated local funding -- twice, completely redesign its service, earn significant and steady ridership growth, coordinate with local specialized providers and position itself as an urban transit agency of the future.

## Desperate Times Forge a New Plan

As 1995 began, SMART officials at all levels were scrambling to survive. An agency lawyer had found a little-used loophole in a state law to create separate county transit authorities. These authorities could place a ballot issue before voters in their respective counties on a local property tax, known as a millage. The agency had roughly 100 days to convince the three counties that make up the SMART service area to:

- place a 1/3 mil property tax before the voters;
- get as many communities as possible to agree to put the tax vote on their ballots;
- develop a support group; and
- get the ballot measure passed.

SMART staff at all levels found themselves traversing the Detroit metropolitan region.

"You had to get used to rejection because many communities turned us down," says Dirks, "but it really gave us a good idea of where we stood with the community and how much we had to change the way we were doing business." All the while, SMART's finance department was developing what Finance Manager

Karen Jensen calls "doomsday scenarios," depending upon if, and where, the tax passed. During one pay period, the agency couldn't even afford to meet its payroll. It became clear to anyone involved with SMART that without passage of the tax, the agency was in deep trouble.

It took strong management-union leadership (SMART employees are represented by four unions: ATU, AFSCME, Teamsters and UAW) to get SMART through this difficult period. Out of these desperate times, however, the agency developed a plan that would see it thrive in the future. SMART officials pledged to commit themselves and the agency to three goals: (1) Redesign its fixed-route bus system to better serve Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties; (2) eliminate the accrued deficit of nearly \$20 million in five years; and (3) put real meaning into community transit service by developing partnerships with local community transit providers and better serving senior citizens, people with disabilities and low-income job seekers. With this plan SMART put itself on the road to recovery.

## **A Fresh Start**

In May of 1995, SMART's tax passed in all three counties and virtually all the communities in which it made the ballot. In 1996, several additional communities adopted the tax (at the same time, two towns also voted it down). Funds from these so-called opt-in communities began to flow and SMART began its incredible revitalization -- today the debt is less than \$5 million and the agency is on schedule to completely eliminate it ahead of schedule.

"We began the process of revamping SMART with a simple theory: identify any problems, then work to solve them," says Dirks.

The successful initial tax vote -- which few in the community perceived as ongoing funding -- bought SMART the time (three years) to substantially improve its service, to launch new outreach efforts to the community and to begin building continued support.

## **Building the New SMART**

Sticking to its commitments after the tax vote, SMART set about changing its design. But officials found that such fundamental changes mandated the necessity of new organizational goals. "We felt like we needed to become mobility managers and not just bus operators," says Dirks. "So we looked for ways to improve and we went for it."

SMART's Board of Directors also played a key role during this crucial period. "We encouraged the staff to be creative and to not be afraid to make mistakes," says current Board Chair and former Federal Transit Administration Deputy Administrator (1983-1989) Matthew Wirgau. SMART's Board is appointed by county executives in two of the three counties and the chair of the Board of Commissioners in the third.

So the agency set about reinventing urban -- and suburban -- transit. The age-old route structure was the first to go. Forty-foot coaches rumbling along fixed routes were not going to be the single solution for service to seniors, people with disabilities and employment trips. At that time, Dirks began to realize an underlying tenant to everything he believes about public transportation today.

"There just isn't any single service mode that is always the solution for a community's mobility needs," he says. "You've got to have a variety of flexible options and different-sized buses." SMART and its predecessor SEMTA (Southeastern Michigan Transit Authority) had been designed to bring people from the outlying suburbs into downtown Detroit -- a service pattern similar to that of hundreds of cities. But by the mid-1980s, most jobs in the Detroit area had moved to the suburbs. SMART planners and management recognized that they had to rethink their fixed-route service.

"We were looking to get more employers along our new routes," says current SMART Director of Planning Ron Ristau, recalling one of the agency's core commitments.

In December of 1995 the fixed-route overhaul began. Eight of SMART's existing routes were replaced with ones serving new areas while other routes were extended to serve new job centers. During this transition period, ridership figures initially fell as passengers got used to the new service design. But they soon rose again to record levels. In June, 1996, 550,000 people rode SMART fixed-route buses. But with time, the routes proved exceedingly popular. In June, 1998, 750,000 rode (see graph on page 13).

The fixed-route ridership increases can be directly traced to the new routes. In December of 1995, when many were first launched, initial new route ridership hit 3,000 riders for the month. By October of 1998, nearly 50,000 people boarded SMART buses along these same routes.

Much of these fixed-route improvements were developed to meet the needs of both employers and job seekers. Suddenly, 5,500 employers were located along SMART bus routes for the first time and 86,000 new potential employees could access them. The goal of connecting people with jobs was being met.

Also in early 1996, SMART began to put its community transit service on the streets. The community transit service, though available to anyone, was specifically designed to provide a more customized service to better meet the mobility needs of seniors and people with disabilities. Using smaller buses with both the community's name and SMART logo emblazoned alongside, the service runs like a dial-a-ride, but without any advance notice deadlines. Customers can call and request a ride immediately and SMART's dispatchers do their best. Some of the community transit buses run on the service-route concept -- in which a bus covers an entire specified area while travelling between two points that are scheduled; others simply serve an entire county or township without a time schedule.

There is a clear emphasis at SMART on first serving local residents who either don't have cars or can't drive.

"We're not focusing on trying to get people out of their cars, that's not as much of a priority for us as is serving people who have no other way to go," says Dirks. Besides providing its own community transit service, SMART is working with numerous specialized transit providers in-and-around the three-county area to coordinate service and better provide regional mobility. This partnership arrangement, which agency officials call Community Based Service Plans, allow local communities and townships to continue successful mobility efforts by collaborating with SMART. Presently, SMART has more than 50 community partners, and a unique relationship with each.

Tammy Warzecha of Brownstone Township, a community partner, operates a single van for seniors and people with disabilities. She appreciates SMART's help and looks forward to increased cooperative activities. "They're (SMART) here to help us," she says. "They help with everything from developing funding proposals and acquiring vehicles to maintenance and dispatching."

## **SMART Business Allies**

The emphasis on employment transportation connected SMART with one of its most important allies: the business community. And the agency's new-found emphasis on flexibility was the key in developing this vital relationship. The city of Troy, in Oakland County, is a good example. Troy is home to the headquarters of K-Mart and Kelly Temporary Services, in addition to numerous shopping malls, hotels and other firms. Currently, more than 110,000 day-time employees work in Troy, only a quarter of whom actually live in the city. That's where SMART comes in. "As part of our effort to position Troy as the business community of choice," says Gayla Houser, president of the Troy Chamber of Commerce, "we look to SMART to help deliver employees."

The Troy Chamber of Commerce, in fact, took a gamble with SMART by supporting the agency's 1995 millage campaign on little more than good faith. The transit improvements and flexibility that SMART offers Troy today were merely concepts at the time. "In our minds," says Houser, "the most important aspects about SMART are its diversity and flexibility. For example, at a local Sears, the human resource manager recently needed the bus schedule adjusted slightly so employees could arrive on-time. SMART immediately did it."

Dirks notes that when dealing with the business community, SMART has been careful not to promise anything that the system can't deliver. Now, as part of its business recruiting package, the Troy Chamber of Commerce includes information about SMART.

The system's concentration on employment services goes beyond working cooperatively with the business community. The agency has also taken the lead in connecting unemployed local residents with jobs by developing innovative tools for job developers and placement organizations.

SMART planning staff have developed an interactive database which allows a job developer and prospective employees to make better decisions about job opportunities.

"We needed these folks to think transit first," says Ristau, who had headed up this effort. The software system SMART has designed will help job placement officials throughout the Detroit region locate jobs closer to a prospective employee's residence, nearer to day care (if necessary) and accessible via public transit. Mapping software pinpoints job opportunities, day care centers and SMART transit service. Using database technology, a job seeker can search for certain types of employment, or jobs with certain work hours and can immediately see how to get there.

Through the system's Get a Job, Get a Ride program, SMART even offers free passes to newly employed workers. "We tried to walk a mile in the shoes of the job developers," says Ristau. "And we think software like this can help avoid wasting valuable transportation dollars."

## **The Referendum**

The true test of the effectiveness of all of SMART's changes since 1995 came last August when its local tax came up for renewal and had to be voted upon once again by each community, county and township. Once again, it was do or die for the agency.

"Every four years, we stare death in the face, so to speak," said SMART's former General Manager Rick Kaufman, who stepped down in October. There was little comparison, however, between the 1995 and 1998 campaigns. SMART officials spent 14 months preparing for the 1998 millage renewal vote rather than the 100 days they had in 1995. The campaign support committee raised \$170,000 from the local business community expressly to wage a successful campaign.

Three SMART staffers, Marketing Manager Melissa Hightower, Government Relations Representative Jim Curran and Public Relations Manager Beth Gibbons, spent the bulk of their time on a successful public information campaign that was coordinated with the campaign committee and employed television and radio advertisements, print advertisements, employee phone banks and direct mail.

Yet none of these tactics could have been effective if the service wasn't effective and winning the loyalty of riders.

"Each rider is a voter," concurs Hightower, who recalls that senior riders were actually calling SMART to see what they could do to help. The key message from SMART throughout the campaign was that the millage was not a new tax and that voters should support it. Curran credits the campaign support committee's television commercials as a key component of the race. Each advertisement featured an emotional plea from a dependent rider to keep the SMART buses rolling. The riders spoke from their hearts about how important the bus is to their quality of life. One senior rider even cried during the filming.

By running the advertisements on targeted cable television stations during specific time slots, SMART's support group controlled the air-time costs and maximized the advertisements exposure (for a complete kit of SMART campaign materials, call the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279).

Another innovative tactic employed by the SMART campaign committee was the use of Friend to Friend post cards that allowed riders and advocates to mail a message of support to friends and family, urging them to support the tax. The cards included a standardized plea and space for people to add a personal message. In all, 30,000 cards were mailed across the region.

And the results were overwhelming. In Oakland County, 20 communities approved the millage by a total of 79 percent; in Wayne County, 27 communities voted yes by 69 percent; and in Macomb County, 24 communities supported the millage by 70 percent. This community support can be partially credited to the strategic campaign, but is equally the result of SMART's community outreach and responsiveness. Simply put, you cannot market bad service, no matter how ingenious the marketing techniques. "The community saw that SMART had been good stewards with their money," says Board Chair Wirgau.

Having been forced to organize a campaign in 1995 with little preparation, the agency and the campaign committee also made sure to be ready for 1998. "Early on, right after the 1995 vote, we realized that contact with our riders was vital," says Gibbons. "You need to have constant contact with the grassroots."

Curran concurs: "Becoming more connected with our riders and the community is an ongoing effort -- you can't just turn it on and off."

## **Leadership with Vision**

Dedicated leadership has helped lead SMART to where it is today. Beginning with Mike Duggan, who is now Deputy Wayne County Executive and still serves on the SMART Board of Directors, the agency has been fortunate to be run by leaders with vision.

Dirks credits Duggan with setting the agency on its present course: "He may not have been a transportation insider, but he realized what would sell this service to the community and he then put his considerable political energy into finding financial support for SMART." Having spent more than 20 years at SMART, Dirks has considerable experience with public transportation "he has held 10 different positions with the agency. But he continues to advocate for the service. A couple of weeks after being named general manager, he was out on the road for a morning meeting with the city manager of South Lyon, an insulated smaller community that opted out of the SMART network in the past.

"We'll help you survey local residents," Dirks offered to City Manager Rod Cook, "to determine their transit needs." He also volunteered to work with the community to develop a Community Based Service Plan tailored to the unique needs of South Lyon. Cook agreed to the survey and was gratified that Dirks would pay a personal visit.

On the ride back to his office, Dirks summed up the meeting: "Every community has different mobility needs. Line-haul service works in some areas, while community transit better serves others. Part of SMART being mobility managers is to get out and help communities determine their needs. I can think of no more important part of my job."

## **Solving the Suburban Puzzle**

The future of urban transit will be different in every city. But the model SMART provides is useful. Flexibility can only be achieved when a transit agency can offer

the community numerous mobility solutions. There is no magic bullet -- particularly in rapidly expanding suburban areas.

Serving suburban regions, in fact, is likely the single-most pressing challenge facing urban transit providers. Suburb-to-suburb commutes have overtaken all others and sprawl now creeps farther from center cities than ever before.

Though the relative merits of sprawl are not the subject here, it is unlikely to abate in the near future. As one member of SMART's Board of Directors correctly says: "One man's sprawl is another's economic development." SMART's success is proof that there is a viable role for public transit in both urban and suburban areas today. That this success comes in the aftermath of near collapse just four years ago is hardly coincidental -- in many cities it would take such a catastrophe to energize an agency to change.

For SMART, the price of success is a continuing commitment by the management and leadership to strive always to serve the passengers and the community, while being flexible and innovative. The message is clear: Any crisis can be surmounted and that even in the most traditional of urban areas community transit approaches can not only prevail, they can become the building block of the 21st century transit system.

More than anything else, this success story harkens back to three commitments SMART officials adopted in the face of extinction. At that time, the agency dedicated itself to erasing its accumulated debt, redesigning its service and putting real meaning into community transit. Four years later, the job is nearly done.