

Getting SMART

For too long and in too many areas, transit operations have seemingly cared little for what their customers wanted. Instead, transit systems forced ridership to acquiesce to fixed routes and time tables. Industry experts have argued that mass transportation service in this country has changed little since the 1920s. Today, however, change seems inevitable.

by Scott Bogren

As Congress prepares to slash federal transportation funding (see latest Federal Funding information), forcing transit agencies to take long looks at their current services, a new transit vision is developing. Service redesigns are bringing new riders onto public transportation as concerned system management looks to increase ridership and build ties with the communities in which they operate.

In Detroit, Mich., the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) has totally revamped its services providing increased community coverage, coordination, flexibility and the ability to target specific potential rider markets. In SMART's case, the agency identified employment transportation as a critical community need."

Two years ago, we realized fixed routes were not enough," says SMART's Director of Planning, Service Development and Paratransit Service Dan Dirks.

Jobs Shift Faster than Transit

As is the case in many Midwestern industrial areas, Detroit was ravaged in the past 20 years by the decay of its major manufacturing industries. Once stable industries that provided the city's backbone largely vanished, leaving Detroit with a 12 percent unemployment rate. It was a familiar pattern: jobs left the city while new job opportunities largely were in the suburbs.

During the 1980s, the city lost 100,000 jobs while the outlying tri-county area gained more than 250,000 new jobs. Unemployment in the inner-city areas ran two-to-three times that of the suburbs.

Ironically, in a city best known for producing automobiles, nearly one in three households is carless. This lack of mobility further exacerbated the unemployment problem because the urban fixed-route transit system couldn't keep pace with the swiftly changing job market.

"There was an overabundance of unemployed residents living in the city," recalls Dirks.

A New Vision

SMART officials had a new vision for how public transportation needed to be redesigned to better serve the Detroit area.

They realized that a single, centralized system was not effectively meeting the region's needs. In its stead, they devised a multi-tiered system. One tier would be long, regional fixed routes that cross county lines. Another tier would consist of community-based feeder routes tailored to the local area's unique needs and link up with the fixed routes.

Funding, too, would be allocated to both tiers, allowing local governments to purchase or provide their own service. While the regional fixed-route system would use the familiar larger buses, the community services would operate smaller buses, vans and even cars. Half the agency's 240 vehicle fleet will soon be 28-foot small buses. These smaller vehicles use the many options the local street network provides.

"We involved local government, the media, the business community, retail center's, colleges, seniors, job creators and trainers and more," says Dirks. "By bringing all these people together while the plan was in its infancy, we received rational input."

The resulting system brings transportation services to many more Southeastern Michigan residents and makes regional transportation service a reality (Map 1 for a profile of the system before and Map 2 for the improvements).

Using Technology to Coordinate

At the same time, SMART had secured federal funding to implement a real-time demand-responsive computer scheduling and dispatching system which would greatly enhance local transportation coordination.

With the new system, SMART can take client bookings and schedule trips on available paratransit and dispatch vehicles. Additionally, the new dispatch system allows for 50 remote users to link up and add their private transportation resources to the mix of options available.

The result is a real-time scheduling and dispatch system that incorporates all of the region's transportation options. Anyone looking to schedule a trip can instantly view all their alternatives.

"We want to become mobility managers, giving everyone the transit they want and the options they need," says Dirks.

Targeting Employment Transit Trips

In the midst of these routing and scheduling innovations and expanded service, SMART officials were looking to develop new programs to stimulate employment transportation trips.

In 1993, SMART launched a program designed to help the newly employed get to work. The Get a Job-Get a Ride program gives a month's worth of free rides on SMART to anyone in the Detroit area that gets a job. To date, nearly 1,000 employers have signed onto the program and more than 7,000 people have received a free monthly pass.

A year later, SMART inaugurated a Job Express service designed to take people directly to jobs that are currently up to a mile away from the main bus route. This extension brings 800 employers and more than 16,000 actual jobs within SMART's service area that were not previously accessible.

Other employment-related programs kicked off by SMART include an over-the-phone information listing of job openings along bus routes. A TransitChek program allows employers to provide employees with up to \$60 per month in a tax-free benefit.

Results Pending

"It's a system that is flexible and responsive to the community," says Dirks.

SMART has developed a system which directly responds to the community's needs. More people have transportation services available to them and trips to jobs and job training are on the rise. It's an example of how a modern transportation system can become part of the community's solution.