

Extraordinary Texas

by Scott Bogren

Nothing in Texas is ordinary. Nothing. From the arid, high desert scrub land around El Paso to the gentle undulations of the Hill Country north of Austin to the bustling Houston suburbs, Texas is a state of startling contrasts and larger than life characters. Community and public transit are no different.

Replete with enormous legislative feats, breathtaking innovation, long-held grudges and a cast of characters each more intriguing than the next, community and public transit in Texas is not one, but a thousand tales best told to the tune of a country song and a warm, dry breeze. To try to do anything more than scratch the surface in a weeks' time is folly. But try I did.

Transit throughout Texas is thriving. Ridership's booming, new systems have been launched and expanded services and facilities are being built. During my week-long journey, in fact, I found myself astounded by the building of transit facilities and services. That's right — in one of the nation's most conservative political atmospheres the value of public and community transportation is well known. The lesson is clear: if it can be done in Texas, it can happen in your state.

A key ingredient in this success is, not surprisingly, funding. Rural and small urban transit operations in the Lone Star State enjoy one of the highest levels of state support in the nation. For the coming year, these agencies will receive more than \$60 million in state transit funding. Comparatively, these agencies receive a little more than \$30 million in Section 5311 and 5307 formula funds. In urban areas, transit agencies have taxing authority — up to one cent of a metropolitan area's sales tax. This authority generates money for such cities as Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, Corpus Christi and El Paso.

Yet there remains something more here in Texas, something money cannot buy: unparalleled leadership. Many of the nation's foremost public and community transportation managers call Texas home and the pervasiveness and variety of mobility alternatives throughout the state is testament to the vision and dogged determination of these individuals for whom transit is much more than a mere occupation, it is a passion.

" Down in the West Texas town of El Paso..."

Nowhere has the success of public and community transportation in Texas been better hidden than in El Paso — the westernmost outpost in the Lone Star State.

Arriving on what had to be the last flight into the city, I was fortunate to have a frustrated tour guide driving the shuttle van to my hotel. Ricardo — an engineering student at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) — pointed out that El Paso is really a single metropolitan region consisting of two cities, El Paso and Juarez. Currently the fourth largest city in the state, El Paso has a population of nearly 700,000,

while Juarez sprawls out at 1.2 million. By 2010, however, the entire region will likely top 2.5 million in population.

As we drove along I-10, which parallels the Rio Grande, Ricardo pointed south when I asked him where El Paso ends and Juarez begins.

"It's hard to see the Rio Grande even in broad daylight," he added, smiling, "it's more of a trickle than a river; not much of a border."

I strained a look into the darkness and couldn't see the river for the life of me.

"Do you see where the brighter white lights turn into the dimmer orange lights?" Ricardo asked. Indeed I did. "That's where Juarez begins," he summed up. I spent the rest of my time in El Paso always looking over at Juarez and never once did I get a clear view of the Rio Grande, unless I was right on top of it. So goes the life of a border community, as I came to understand.

Morning revealed a city in the midst of an encouraging revitalization. El Paso has retained its downtown urban core while recently constructing a uniquely shaped art museum and beginning work on a new convention center. Transit, as I'd come to learn, is really at the heart of the city's revitalization plans. And no wonder.

I staked out a bench in the nearby Oregon Street Plaza which teemed with transit activity. Forty-foot buses pulled up full of passengers around the plaza as did a steady stream of trolley buses — all under the watchful gaze of several technicolor alligators adorning a fountain at the square's heart. People bustled between vehicles or down the pedestrian-friendly streets to work. For anyone interested in effective public transit, this was a site to behold.

A couple blocks off the Oregon Street Plaza, a nondescript glass building rises 10 stories above the busy parking lot that surrounds it. It's City Hall — where much of El Paso's revival has been plotted and where I had a brief chat with El Paso Mayor Carlos Ramirez.

"We're trying to leverage federal transit dollars to improve the overall quality of life of El Pasoans," explained Mayor Ramirez before sitting up from his plush desk chair and walking over to a large window that affords a commanding view of the city. As soon as I joined the mayor at the window he began to animatedly point to all of the transit-oriented development underway or recently completed.

"We've built several terminals and facilities, along with some parking structures that make it easier for people to use transit," said Mayor Ramirez. "It's an investment in the people of this city because it creates a livable community — and it seems to be working."

In the distance, beyond the projects of which the Mayor is clearly proud, looms Juarez. From the vantage point of this mayoral perch, I saw the size of the city across the river — it stretched farther than I could see. I pointed to Juarez and asked the mayor how its presence effected public transit in El Paso.

"Well," he said, smiling as if it were a question he regularly answers. "See that haze rising above Juarez?" Indeed a brownish-reddish fog seemed to hang in the air over Mexico's fifth largest city. "Air quality's an issue here but much of it emanates from the other side of the border. More than half the streets of Juarez are unpaved and the vehicles over there are older. That and the industry, which has really picked up after NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) are the reasons. And we just can't put up a curtain along the border." Later, I learned that the day had been labeled an ozone action alert day.

I asked about the uniqueness of running only a portion of a large metropolitan region with virtually no control over the larger section.

"It is tough, but not impossible," he said. "We try to coordinate and cooperate where and when we can."

As part of the effort to keep the air in El Paso clean, more than 60 percent of Sun Metro's (the city's transit system) buses run on natural gas. From the Mayor's window I saw the spectacular and historic Union Depot, home to Sun Metro and next on my list of appointments. An imposing red-brick structure with a single tower and spire, the Union Depot was built in 1905 and renovated during the 1980s. Sun Metro moved into the old train station — which Amtrak continues to serve — in 1980.

Terry Lee Scott directs Sun Metro, of this there can be little question. He came to the agency in 19XX having spent 29 years with the U.S. Army, reaching the rank of Colonel. Notably, he was the garrison commander at the impossibly named Fort Bliss (just north of the city), so he came to the job familiar with the El Paso region.

"I've moved people and equipment across the world," he says matter-of-factly. "So moving people across town didn't seem to me to be too difficult."

Scott has an authoritative demeanor befitting an ex-army officer, but is understated and soft-spoken; he laughs heartily and readily. He has been known to respond to a passenger's complaint or suggestion about Sun Metro with, "Come see me." And many have taken him up on the offer with most leaving satisfied that Sun Metro is doing all it can.

Scott understands his agency's dual role both in the revitalization of El Paso and in simply providing a transportation alternative to those with limited choices. It is his challenge to blend two goals together and a more well-suited individual for this task I cannot imagine.

As with everything else in El Paso, transit services are greatly impacted by Juarez. Scott estimates that half of his 13 million annual riders live across the border. For many of these passengers, Sun Metro is the only way to get around. At the same time, the agency's most popular routes are express service from the El Paso suburbs into downtown that attract a more affluent rider. In addition to these traditional fixed-route bus services, Sun Metro operates three trolley-bus routes in the downtown core and a growing neighborhood service on the east side of town. Finally, the system also runs the LIFT paratransit service.

"Our ridership is pretty steady," said Sun Metro's Community Relations Manager Paul Stresow. "A lot of the vehicles are full at certain times of the day."

Which leads some in the community to ask Scott why his agency is so involved in facility building, rather than vehicle purchasing.

"People will say, 'Why don't you buy new buses'," chuckled Scott. "They don't understand that we're trying to build a real transportation network here in El Paso that will offer a family of transit services all connected by terminals. We do have a strategy."

Judging by the fevered transit facility building underway in and around El Paso, I'd say the strategy is working quite nicely, thank you.

The Oregon Street Transit Mall, where I began my day marveling at all the Sun Metro passengers, was completed on August 18 of this year and is merely the first in a series of projects. Previously, buses converged from all sides of the one-square-block park, creating congestion and diminishing its beauty. Today, trolleys and buses serve specific sections of the Mall, complete with wrought-iron-style shelters and easy transfer areas. Extra-wide paver-stone sidewalks and ornate street lamps augment the overhaul with utility and character.

South of the Oregon Street Transit Mall, an even more ambitious undertaking, the Union Plaza Project, is taking shape. Scott calls the project the cornerstone of El Paso's downtown transit-oriented revitalization. Thus far, some street scaping work has been completed with the more serious demolition to begin before the end of the year. The scope of the Union Plaza Project is dazzling — eventually, a 14-block area will be completely revamped with an open-air plaza connecting Sun Metro's Union Depot headquarters at the north end with a planned six-story trolley terminal. The real gem of this project, clearly, will be the trolley terminal (currently, trolley riders make up 10 percent of Sun Metro's ridership, but Scott expects that to expand). Upon completion in 20XX the trolley terminal will have a 400-space parking garage, 6,000 square feet of retail space and a design that complements that of Sun Metro's historic Union Depot. In fact, all of the terminals and facilities under construction around El Paso use the Union Depot as a design motif. Scott hopes to make an 1857 railroad locomotive the crowning element of the trolley terminal.

"El Paso has a long railroad history, so having Engine #1 as part of this project would be fitting," Scott said.

For the time being much of the Union Plaza Project remains yet undone. Walking through the neighborhood, however, it's easy to see that work is underway. The streets and sidewalks have been revamped with large stars fashioned from stones built into most of the intersections. Benches have been placed throughout the neighborhood and two parks are in varying stages of completion. Blocks of abandoned housing and warehouses sit idly, waiting to be razed. I closed my eyes and the artist's conception of the finished Union Plaza didn't seem so far off.

Scott sees the project far beyond its transit implications. "I'd like to see a day care center in the trolley terminal," he said. "This project will reenergize this entire neighborhood, we're already starting to see businesses becoming interested in locating in the area."

Recently, Scott became aware of an unusual complaint about the Union Plaza Project. A local comedian made reference to the project's benches, and how they faced away from the street — he made light out of the fact that the agency has located all of its benches facing in the wrong direction. Scott's rebuttal illustrated the real goals of this multi-faceted project.

"I ended up telling anyone who would listen that this project is all about developing the neighborhood and community and not simply about transit. Those benches prove it. People might really like to sit and face the parks and sidewalks and not parked cars," he says with a sly smile.

But wait... there's more! Sun Metro has in its plans an International Intermodal Terminal to be located right at the border. The \$7 million project will house Greyhound Bus service, charter transportation operators, taxis, Sun Metro trolleys and buses and, eventually, a fixed-route guideway connecting Juarez with El Paso. It only makes sense to me, even after being here a single day, for this type of facility to be built — anything that will bring the two burgeoning cities together will help.

"NAFTA created a streamlined, efficient way for goods and equipment to cross the border," said Scott. "We now must develop a way to efficiently move people across it."

Mayor Ramirez noted, when discussing clean air initiatives, that traffic at the bridges crossing the Rio Grande (particularly the free bridge) often stands still for upwards of 45 minutes. The pollution generated by these delays, according to the Mayor and Scott, is significant.

Driving away from downtown El Paso with Scott and Stresow, we head for the various neighborhood terminals that Sun Metro is constructing to better facilitate express route connections and transfers.

The terminal at Five Points is nearing completion. To involve local students in the transit system, the terminal offers colorful tiles painted by elementary school students. Scott gets a charge out of one of the tiles where a kid opined: "It beats riding the dog."

From Five Points we head to the East Side Terminal, a two-year old facility with numerous pull-up bays and connections offered all around El Paso. This terminal is in pristine condition offering riders bike lockers and eye-catching landscaping. Honestly, I had never seen so much transit-oriented development in any city — and never fathomed it would all be happening in El Paso. But it is!

The end of our tour takes us to the San Antonio Transit Plaza nearby the central city area. Though smaller than the rest of the projects, the San Antonio Plaza is unique in that it incorporates a historic tree into the design. And as with all of the facilities in the region, the tower and spire of the original Union Depot are incorporated into the structure. Scheduled for completion in late October, the San Antonio Plaza sits directly across the street from a large federal building complex whose workforce will surely generate increased Sun Metro ridership and local economic development.

El Paso was named for being a pass through the mountains at the southern tip of the Rockies. Today, perhaps they ought to re-write history and say that the moniker came from all of the mobility options the city offers its residents. Indeed, a day's passage on Sun Metro in El Paso highlights some of the most innovative transit-oriented economic development projects one is likely to find in the U.S.

Any Day's a Great Day in Austin

Before I continue, I'll just admit up front that Austin is one of my favorite cities. Great food, wonderful music, lively streets and neighborhoods with character — hey, what's not to like?

Transit in Austin might soon undergo a significant change. Austin-area residents in the November election will decide whether or not to provide significant local funding for a light-rail system. In early October, at least, the local newspapers seem optimistic that it will pass.

Since my last visit in 1993, the city has grown considerably, and judging by the building boom on the west side of town, it continues to do so. The high-tech industry, led by Dell, has settled in Austin lending the city some economic clout but also swelling the population.

I paid my first visit in Austin to Margot Massey, director of the public transit division of the Texas Department of Transportation. Winding my way through the DOT building's security and up to the top floor, I find Massey and the public transit division staff busy at work. In all, TexDOT (as it is known throughout the state) has 14,000 employees, 40 of whom work in the public transit division.

"It has taken some time, but this agency has slowly begun to realize that we can't build ourselves out of congestion. So transit is playing a more important role in the department," said Massey who has spent more than 20 years at the agency. "But many people still think of us as the highway department."

From behind a desk studiously bereft of a single sheet of paper (she later sheepishly admitted to having swept it clean into a hidden pile just before we began), Massey presents a congenial and earnest mentality and seems delighted to discuss public and community transit and Texas. When asked why transit is thriving throughout the state, her answer is quick and clear.

"Our success is due to the strong transit leaders throughout the state. These folks are some of the most politically astute individuals and have made the industry's case over a number of years," said Massey. "They make this job easy." She also says that the keys to their success have been providing excellent service to Texans and then simply letting their local decision makers know about it.

Massey downplays her department's role in the success, "We've never thought that we knew best. We try not to micromanage the agencies."

As for how this industry thrives in such a conservative political climate, Massey paused to think before she spoke. "We've always been mindful— this department and the transit systems— of the political realities of the state. We don't try to create big, splashy headlines. Rather the focus is on moving forward and better serving people." She smiled wanly and reminded me that state funding for rural and small-urban transit is quite considerable, as much as double that of federal funds.

"This funding is a testament to some of the people you'll be visiting later this week," she added.

Dave Marsh, executive director of the Capital Area Rural Transportation System (CARTS), a nine county system in-and-around Austin, is one of those people — and CARTS is my next stop.

Marsh is something of an icon in the community transportation field. He is a man of great contrasts: articulate and mumbling, combative and gregarious, unpredictable and consistent. He is also as passionate a community transportation advocate as exists. He is not interested in doing things the convenient or easy way, but only in doing them well and to his own — albeit unique — standard.

Later in the day, as we visited the fabulous facility that CARTS is building in San Marcos (30 miles south of Austin), Marsh revealed to me that he had searched for months to find just the right stone for the facing of the new building. "You know how I am," he grudgingly admitted and laughed.

CARTS is a network of interconnected transit services that offer residents of central Texas transit both within their communities and connections to such destinations as San Antonio and Austin. It operates in rural, small-urban and urban localities, serving all with a single philosophy.

"We use the phrase, 'We're going places for you' in our marketing materials, but the service really lives up to that promise," said Marsh.

Indeed, CARTS embodies a true family of services approach to mobility in the 123 communities in which it operates. In Lockhart, La Grange, Bastrop and San Marcos, the agency offers fixed-route transit service, in addition to intercity and demand-response transportation. CARTS operates nine park-and-ride lots that transport riders into Austin via its Capital Loop Service and it has intermodal terminals in Austin, Round Rock, Georgetown, San Marcos, Smithville, and Bastrop. Riders can get virtually anywhere in the country from these facilities, which incorporate Greyhound, Amtrak, intercity bus, taxi and airport shuttle services, among others.

The Round Rock facility is testament to Marsh's dream of seamless mobility and increased options for passengers. While there, the station manager (NEED NAME) illustrated how with only two connections I could get all the way to Baltimore, Md., on a Greyhound bus that would be in later that day. As the details of this fictitious trip were printed, Marsh smiled widely and said, "Our goal in all of our intermodal facilities is to offer as many choices as possible to the public."

All of CARTS' facilities are built around this ideal. The station under construction in San Marcos is further proof as it will offer residents six different mobility options. Another consistent theme of these facilities is their beauty. CARTS does not construct thrown-together facilities for its services. Each one is unique, but the attention to detail and design is hard to miss. At its headquarters in East Austin, the building sits on the site of an old cotton seed oil mill. Built in 1983, the facility incorporates six East Texas pine columns that were preserved from the original mill into the public waiting area.

In San Marcos CARTS purchased land that had once again been previously used in the cotton seed oil business, though a remaining vestige — a small office structure— of the property's past incarnation was so well hidden by years of property neglect that it went undetected at the time of sale. Upon

discovering its presence, Marsh decided that the new intermodal facility ought to blend with this old one, which he hopes will serve as a coffee house in the completed project.

"There's no reason why transit facilities have to be dull, utilitarian buildings," said Marsh as we walked around the San Marcos construction site admiring the color of the San Saba sandstone he'd finally selected. "Our facilities need to be beautiful public spaces that are inviting to our customers and attract people."

Marsh is as good a person as any to discuss the emergence of community and public transportation innovation in Texas. Beginning with his time driving a shuttle bus at the University of Texas in the late 1960s, he has manned the front lines of transit. Under his direction, CARTS was both an original Section 147 demonstration program recipient and a Section 18 grantee.

"I tend to recall the battles a little more vividly than I do the actual victories," he said as he began to run through a litany of funding squabbles and long since rebuffed raids on rural transit funds down through the years with a wistful look on his face. "Right from the start, the intercity bus providers viewed rural transit in Texas as a threat," he said. "But look at CARTS now, we share facility space with intercity operators and Greyhound. We fought with the state too, to create and then defend the state funding we receive. But we've always done well there too. You see, [state] legislators love us because we carry their mothers."

He recalled a meeting years ago in which his agency bused in senior riders to help prove a point about the necessity of the service. "I remember the looks on the faces of the legislators and our adversaries at the time."

I asked him why community and public transit have done so well in Texas — not just with funding but also with innovative service design and facility development. He grew contemplative and paused at length before he replied.

"The people who have worked so hard to make all of this possible, they've done it because they love it," he noted. "It's become more than just a job, it's a passion. These folks haven't been hoping to succeed here long enough to take jobs in bigger systems or in other parts of the country. They've wanted to succeed right here and they've been passionate in pursuing that success."

Heading northwest out of Austin I encountered one of the many secrets of Texas: the stunning Hill Country. Rolling hills dried brown by a stubborn drought drifted by reminiscent of the back drop for many a western film as I made my way to San Saba, home of Hill Country Transit.

Pecan orchards envelop San Saba — which according to a sign on the outskirts of town bills itself as the Pecan Capital of the World. It's a small town of some 2,600 residents; a town that one might think doesn't need community transportation. Yet there it is, in a metal-roofed industrial-looking building just outside of town along Route 190 (right next to the San Saba Pecan Company), Hill Country Transit's headquarters.