

# A TRADITION OF TRANSPORTATION, AND SERVING EVERYONE

*In rural Northwest Kansas, a community transportation system designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities has transitioned into a full-fledged public transportation operation. Everyone rides together in Hays.*

By Scott Bogren

No story about Hays, Kansas — its past, present or future — can be told without mention of transportation. The town was founded with the arrival of the Union Pacific Railroad in August of 1867. Easy access via the railroad and later the interstate helped Hays thrive and become a regional economic dynamo in Northwest Kansas. Continued regional air service, a rarity in modern rural America, today connects Hays with the rest of the nation, and world.

The railroad still runs through Hays, as does Interstate 70. Fort Hays, once a key western garrison, is now a state historical site. Further proving the area's transportation pedigree, Walter Chrysler was born and raised in nearby Ellis (population 1,800) and learned the mechanical skills in the Union Pacific Shops he'd later use in his automobile company.

"We became a town due largely to transportation," says Hays Mayor Troy Hickman. "Since then, things have changed — but we're still a regional economic hub, due to transportation."

Today, Hays has a population of 20,000, while all of Ellis County holds some 27,000 residents. Transit plays an increasingly important role in the region's present — and future.

## **"Home on the Range"**

Rural western Kansas is sparsely populated prairie land with steep grassy slopes and few trees. Vast distances separate the small towns that dot the map, the type of distances that challenge community and public transportation operations. In 1873, Dr. Brewster Higley penned the Kansas State Song, "Home on the Range," after arriving in this part of Kansas — known locally as Post Rock Country for the unique local stones used as posts for fencing.

Public transportation is thriving in Hays. The ACCESS Transportation System provided more than 50,000 rides to residents throughout Ellis County last year. ACCESS links people with jobs, medical and social services, education, shopping and much more.

ACCESS is a prime example of the transition many community transportation systems have undergone, from their roots as fully accessible, specialized operations to service for everyone. Accessible transportation used to mean wheelchair lifts, ramps and demand-response service. Today, however, systems like ACCESS prove that accessible really means that everyone in the community can ride, where they need to go, when they need to go.

"Our initial charge was to ensure that people with disabilities had an efficient way to get around the community," recalls Ron Straight, CCTM, ACCESS' transportation manager. "We've become an efficient way for *everyone* to get around."

"Ninety percent of our trips serve Hays," says Straight. "The remainder are





ACCESS's new facility — shown here is an artist's rendition — accentuates the system's central place in Hays.



Hays is a regional medical center, so ACCESS services bring many patients in from outlying rural communities.

split fairly evenly between Ellis, which is 12 miles west of Hays, and Victoria, which is 12 miles east.”

The need for public transportation in Hays grew out of the town developing in a scattered pattern. Retail was set far apart from residential areas while employers in commercial districts found themselves isolated, too.

“We’re pretty spread out for our size,” says Mayor Hickman. “We needed transportation to connect us together and to serve people who couldn’t, or didn’t want to drive.”

### **Coordinated Accessibility**

ACCESS Transportation originated in 1989 as a collaboration of three entities that were providing transportation to their clients — separately — in and around Hays.

Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas, Inc. is a developmental disabilities agency that serves individuals in the 18 counties of northwest Kansas, covering 16,000 square miles. It had provided transportation to its clients since 1969.

The second originating agency was the Western Kansas Association on Concerns of the Disabled, which provided services mainly to individuals with physical disabilities. The third entity in the partnership was the City of Hays, whose service had been established mainly for the elderly, with its primary destination the local senior meal site.

In 1989 the Kansas Department of Transportation, Office of Public Transportation, which oversees rural, public and elderly and disabled transportation, was concerned that there were too many uncoordinated vehicles in Ellis County.

“We wanted the county and federal investment to go as far as possible and we did so by supporting this new transit system,” recalls Kathy Marion, a recently retired (after 32 years!) Kansas Department of Transportation program coordinator.

All three transit operators were asked to sit down at the same table and attempt to decipher what — if anything — could be done to have more coordination and less duplication. A partnership was established. ACCESS Transportation was born.

“We realized, collectively, that we could serve more people, more efficiently together than we could separately,” says Straight. “Establishing ACCESS Transportation showed great vision and has paid dividends ever since. Also, we recognized that this new service would allow us to serve anyone who needed a trip.”

“The coordinated approach allowed for more investment and better service,” agrees Marion.

The result was a single transportation service under one roof with Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas, Inc., acting as the lead agency. It was at this same time that Ellis County officials decided to begin investing in transportation service to all of the smaller communities in the county through passage of a county-wide property tax levy to benefit senior services, including transportation. Since then, the state of Kansas has also invested in ACCESS through its Comprehensive Transportation Program. Federal investment rounds out the system’s finances.

“We had to then, and have continued to, educate county commissioners about the transportation needs here in Hays and in Ellis County,” says Dr. W. Clement Wood, former chair of the Ellis County Council on Aging. “Once we let them know that such a system helps the disabled, helps senior citizens, helps people get to the growing medical services we have here, they began to understand transportation’s role a little better.”

And there was never any doubt that the transportation service to emerge from these collaborations and commitments would be fully accessible to *all* members of the community. The

system's history was one of serving people with disabilities. Its future would be one of serving everyone.

Originally most of the system's vehicles were 12-passenger vans. One primary vehicle was equipped with a lift and a secondary vehicle was equipped with a ramp.

"In 1989, our vehicle with the ramp did not meet today's standards because of the angle of the ramp," recalls Straight. "I'm proud to say, however, that today all vehicles in the ACCESS fleet are completely accessible and have been since 1994."

Like so many other growing and established community and public transportation systems in the 1990s, ACCESS expanded its fleet accessibility to meet the needs of everyone in the region. In this decade, accessible vehicles — by the thousands — joined transit fleets around the nation, in big cities and rural towns.

ACCESS' service area remains primarily Hays, with 90 percent of the rides provided within city limits. The remaining 10 percent of the rides are dominated by the next two communities in size — Ellis and Victoria. The service is operated 16 hours a day, 364 days a year, with Christmas being the only day without transportation.

Straight estimates that overall ACCESS ridership can be divided into three general classification: Elderly, 28 percent; disabled, 50 percent; and general public, 22 percent. Criss-crossing Hays and Ellis County, the system's vehicles each travel 175,000 miles per year.

In addition to the eight ACCESS vehicles, the system operates two additional services. To link together many of the small towns in Western Kansas, ACCESS launched its CARE-VAN (Community Access Rural Express) intercity bus service that covers one of three different routes every weekday between St. Francis in the far northwestern corner of the state and Hays. It also initiated a Health Express bus

for medical transportation trips for residents of Ellis and eight surrounding counties to connect with the regional medical care available in Hays.

### **New Technology, New Facility: The Future**

With all transportation services overseen by one agency, all rides are provided on a first-request basis, no matter the destination. Often, requests for rides are handled instantaneously due to a vehicle being in the area. All ACCESS vehicles are equipped with radios and are in regular communication with the dispatching center taking ride requests. ACCESS has employed a computer-aided dispatching program for five years, but Straight felt more modern technology would greatly benefit the service.

"We applied for ITS investment four years ago to look for new tools to improve our service," says Straight.

This summer, ACCESS officials anticipate that new technology will be installed across the system, to include the intercity and health transportation services, utilizing a new computer-aided dispatching program, automated vehicle locators and mobile data computers. This equipment should drastically reduce the paperwork for both the vehicle operators and the dispatcher. It should also increase the efficiency in which rides are dispatched.

"This new technology is a tool to help us provide better service, more efficiently," says Straight.

What's more, the new technology will help ACCESS become the hub of a more regionally based service. The system's new computer-aided dispatching program will be housed in Topeka (200 miles to the east of Hays) and will be capable of eventually dispatching most of the rides for the rural areas of Kansas, which Straight knows will greatly streamline the CARE-VAN intercity bus service and Health Express he operates. Initially there will be two

transportation services coming on line with this innovative equipment — ACCESS and Reno County Area Transit in Hutchinson, Kansas.

Investment in technology is another vital tool in helping transit systems of all types and sizes make the transition from specialized and public services to seamless operations.

In February, construction began on a 14,000-square-foot building that will garage the ACCESS vehicles away from the hail and tornados in Kansas, provide three work bays and house the offices for the dispatching, vehicle maintenance and transportation manager. The facility is scheduled to be completed by the end of the year.

"Getting all our vehicles out of the weather is a top priority," says Straight. "It also moves us right to the center of town and, with some nice ACCESS signage, our image will surely improve locally."

### **Investing in Everyone**

The local, state and federal investment in ACCESS is an investment in mobility for everyone, rather than for specific, targeted audiences within the community. As such, it represents the evolution of transit services across America as they have transitioned into services that all local residents can access and enjoy.

"Truly, the notion that only certain parts of our population here need transportation, or that we need separate services to meet these needs has proven itself false," says Straight. "ACCESS proves that the most successful transit operations are those designed to meet everyone's needs, those that are accessible to all." 🚌