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Ride New Orleans - Regional Transit Report

Our region is not meeting the mobility needs of its residents and businesses.

With high poverty rates and a high percentage of households without access to private vehicles effective public transportation is a necessity for our region. Residents need public transportation to successfully access economic opportunity and businesses need public transportation to ensure access to a large potential workforce.

On balance right now, this is not happening. Ride New Orleans' analysis indicates that the average transit-reliant New Orleanian can only reach 12% of the region's jobs within 30 minutes or less. However, that same individual who has access to a car can reach – on average - 89% of the region's jobs in the same time period.

Addressing this fundamental imbalance is key to advancing both equity and our region's overall economic success.

There are a number of steps that need to be taken but one of the most effective – and cost-effective – is to move beyond our current balkanized regional public transportation system and provide seamless transit options between Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard parishes.

With each parish operating its own separate system, current riders must deal with inefficiencies and inconveniences that add significant time and cost. Routes frequently end at political boundaries instead of major destinations or logical transfer points. Riders going between parishes often pay the equivalent of two full fares for what might be a simple 15-minute trip in a car (though there has been some progress on this front in the last year). Branding, marketing, and communication are completely separate, leading to confusion for existing riders and little reason for potential riders to try public transit.

The agencies, meanwhile, often appear to view each other as competitors chasing customers instead of allies looking for the economies of scale that would result from more coordinated and combined operations.

Fortunately, while the facts on the ground remain grim for many riders, there is a growing acknowledgement from decision makers and stakeholders that something needs to change and recent small improvements in cooperation give the region something to build upon.

The **New Links** regional transit network redesign process, currently underway, is a promising example. This is a yearlong project that will propose ways to redesign our region's entire transit system to provide faster, more frequent options for transit riders – with proposals for new inter-parish connections a potential outcome. Most importantly, all three regional transit agencies – the New Orleans Regional Transit (RTA), Jefferson Transit (JeT), and St. Bernard Urban Rapid Transit (SBURT) are participating, with the Regional Planning Commission (RPC) leading the efforts.

In addition to **New Links**, other recent encouraging signs of progress include:

- In 2019, the RTA and JeT permanently established a "Regional Ride" 24-hour day pass good for unlimited trips between the two systems – which, at $6 doesn't save the majority of riders money, but adds convenience (highlighted later in this report)
- The RTA extended the #39 Tulane bus route to the Ochsner Medical Center in Jefferson Parish, providing more seamless regional access to a major job and health center
- JeT and RTA have consolidated their call centers to more efficiently serve both Orleans and Jefferson Parishes
- New Orleans City Council and Jefferson Councils have unanimously passed joint resolutions supporting and expanding regional connectivity
- Both RTA and JeT have concluded their own strategic plans including the RTA establishing the goal to increase access to jobs from 30% within a 60-minute timeframe to 60% of the region's jobs by the year 2027.

But while there has been progress, our region still does not provide the service riders and businesses need to see. Achieving that requires that regional decision makers and stakeholders take a very deliberate approach toward enhanced regional coordination. Regional transit integration must continue to be an explicit goal and tangible steps toward that goal must serve as the benchmark for further progress.

To enhance that conversation, we outline in the following pages a variety of ways other regions have addressed similar regional transportation challenges. We have researched best practices, lessons learned, and models of cooperation in five different regions. We present them as brief case studies – each with an overall lesson learned, context and relevant details, and suggestions for how the solutions might fit into our local context.

Our hope is to show that there is not just one way to approach regional coordination, but a number of different ways. Better regional transit is not an all-or-nothing, zero-sum game, but rather an ongoing process with different approaches and phases that can lead to a shared ultimate goal – affordable, effective, and equitable transportation choices that works for residents and employers alike.

Selected case studies include:

- A review of our own region's recent initial steps toward a standardized regional fare structure
- Targeted street design efforts individual jurisdictions can use to advance greater regional connectivity, highlighted by a case study in Everett, Massachusetts
- Efforts in the Nashville, Tennessee region to use re-branding and marketing to create the appearance of a seamless network and increase ease-of-use for riders
- A Detroit, Michigan example that shows how two agencies can formally cooperate to operate needed individual regional transit routes
- A summary of the North Carolina Research Triangle's slow steps toward increased reginal coordination over a number of years that has led to more seamless connections for riders and an improved funding climate for revenue enhancements
- A review of the long-term process of the San Diego metro region from multiple competing transit agencies focused on separate jurisdictions to one unified regional transit agency.

Case Study: New Orleans RTA and Jefferson Transit

Lesson Learned: Regional cooperation – even on something as sensitive as revenue – is possible and relatively simple

Summary

The Regional Ride is a transit "day pass" good for 24-hours and allows riders unlimited trips and transfers between the New Orleans RTA and Jefferson Transit (JeT) without having to pay separate fares. The two agencies offered a similar regional pass from 1999 to 2004 but it was discontinued after Hurricane Katrina. Since then, riders had to pay separate fares if transferring between RTA and JeT.

After several years of conversation, both agencies launched a six-month pilot in September 2018 to test whether they should bring it back. The agencies agreed on a price of $6, with each agency receiving $3.

During the pilot, the agencies combined sold 16,000 Regional Ride tickets, with 63,000 total trips taken on the tickets. In spring 2019, the RTA and JeT decided to make the pilot permanent.

What worked well? What were the challenges?

Riders generally responded well to the Regional Ride ticket and the change generated positive media coverage. Traveling between JeT and RTA previously required multiple passes and fares - not including additional transfers – so the convenience of one 24-hour pass for unlimited trips between the two systems is very helpful. It also saves some riders money, as the Regional Ride ticket costs six dollars while two day passes from RTA ($3) and JeT ($4) combined would normally cost seven dollars.

The revenue sharing also proved to be easy. The RTA and JeT simply split the six-dollar fare evenly regardless of how a rider used the Regional Ride pass. In the previous incarnation of the regional pass, a complicated reimbursement formula was devised to track how the passes were being used between systems. This reimbursement policy presented a logistical and eventual political barrier to potential implementation. However, sharing the collected fares evenly eliminated these barriers.

The pilot did require some back-end work before it could go live. The RTA and JeT had to make small investments updating the software in their respective fare collection systems to accept the integrated regional passes.

Case Study: Everett, MA

Lesson Learned: Local leadership can independently and strategically prioritize transit within their jurisdiction and directly contribute to improved regional connectivity

Summary

While the Boston region's subway – the 'T' – stops just outside of Everett, Massachusetts' boundaries, no regional rapid transit lines actually go through the city, despite a highly transit-reliant population. Instead, those transit riders are connected to the rest of the region through a bus corridor on Everett's major street – Broadway - that connects downtown Everett with the T. The Broadway corridor serves 10,000 riders per day with 5 routes and 17 total buses at peak time – but bus service has historically been slow and unreliable, hurting the ability to connect downtown Everett and the city's major residential areas with the rest of the region.

Recognizing the problems this caused, but with no funding available for major new regional infrastructure, Everett officials attacked the problem the only way they could – by making the streets they control more conducive for transit. Similarly lacking funding for an expensive study to model the effects, Everett planners decided to test the idea first with a one-week temporary bus-only lane during morning peak hours for a 1.5 mile stretch of Broadway.

The pilot was inexpensive and low tech – the city simply banned parking in the 1.5-mile stretch from 4 a.m. to 9 am. and city employees placed traffic cones to separate the lane in the morning and two parking enforcement officials ensured that the lane was clear.

The pilot was immediately successful – it reduced bus travel time by 20-30% and reduced automobile congestion as buses no longer blocked traffic when picking up passengers. Within the first week of the pilot's operations it was quickly extended for a longer test period and soon after became permanent.

What worked well? What were the challenges?

Besides the simplicity of implementation, the major success was speeding up the travel time of both buses and automobiles. The city reduced auto congestion and reduced bus travel time by 20-30%. Not only did this provide more reliable regional access for Everett residents, the time savings allowed the transit agency to provide additional service at no extra operational cost because of the increased frequency.

Implementing the pilot was also an effective tool for community engagement. It allowed the city to reach a broader base of people because of the pilot's public visibility and they were able to get more real time feedback, including onboard surveys from riders and data on travel time. The pilot also required less resources than a traditional outreach plan because of its quick implementation.

A potential hurdle in the pilot's implementation was the need to remove parking to make space for the bus-lane along the two-way street on Broadway. However, no serious challenge materialized since parking was only eliminated before regular business hours and there is a large amount of underused parking in the side streets along the corridor.

Local Context

- The New Links plan can help identify local "transit slow zones" - when and where transit is getting stuck in traffic that causes unreliable service – and diagnose transit priority solutions.
- A commonsense transit priority pilot could help to show the benefits and build public support. Pilots are flexible, cost-efficient, and temporary and have potential to quickly deliver improved regional connectivity.

<u>Case Study: Nashville</u>

Lesson Learned: Two agencies can provide the public appearance and functionality of a single, seamless system through rebranding while still maintaining completely separate internal operations

Summary

The Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and Regional Transit Authority of Middle Tennessee (RTA) adopted the unified brand of "WeGo Public Transit". The rebranding makes it appear as though the two main service providers in the Greater Nashville area are one entity. This makes it easier for riders to figure out how to travel around the region and provides a better overall rider experience – while still allowing each agency to maintain independence legally and financially.

The 2016 regional transit plan for Nashville and the surrounding areas, nMotion, identified the rebranding as a key action item. Started in 2018, the process will take three years to be fully implemented throughout the entire system. The three-year timeline and expenses are connected – in order to save costs, all buses and vans will be refurbished according to their standard maintenance schedule. The MTA purchased 31 buses and 19 vans in the summer of 2018, replacing 20 percent of the fleet's vehicles. All new vehicles incorporated the WeGo branding as the agency first acquired them to save costs and provide the fresh new look.

The rebranding includes these specific actions:

- New branding under a single name “WeGo Public Transit” including new iconography and color scheme
- Consolidated passenger information with a single website, scheduling apps, real-time information, and wayfinding at major stops
- New shelters, bus stops, and uniforms
- Updated fare collection technology for an integrated and simpler payment system
- A repurposing and identification for service tiers
- Identify and develop branded regional express service options.

What worked well? What were the challenges?

The overall establishment of nMotion has been effective as it provided the strong planning framework for both short-term improvements and long-term goals.

WeGo officials believe that the branding will have a positive effect, noting that residents who participated in the nMotion process made it very clear that transit service was confusing and hard to understand. They believe that the unified name, logo, and brand colors are an important first step to becoming easier-to-understand and recognizable.

That both agencies have the same planning and management departments is a major strength. This allows for service optimization and efficiency that benefits routing and scheduling for both agencies. Despite needing approval from two different boards, having the same planning and management team in place makes the rebranding process much easier.

Funding for the continued implementation of nMotion remains the biggest challenge – especially after a 2018 funding referendum failed. However, agencies are taking an incremental approach via reasonable and cost-effective improvements. The regional rebranding is one of those first incremental steps.

Consistent timing of the mutual switch to WeGo has been a short-term issue. In addition to the three-year rolling introduction of WeGo, the RTA adopted the brand on a separate timeline well after Nashville MTA approved the change.

Local Context

- Unified branding provides appearance of a seamless regional system by reducing confusion on how to get around and how to pay. That could make a big impact locally even without deeper behind-the-scenes integration between local transit agencies.

<u>Case Study: Detroit</u>

Lesson Learned: Regional coordination can occur one line at a time

Summary

The Detroit area's two major transit agencies – the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) and the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) – did not have a strong track record of coordination after experiencing years of tension regarding funding and operational jurisdiction. But that changed in 2016 as the Southeast Michigan Regional Transit Authority (RTA) – charged by the state with providing resources to, and, ultimately, integrating, the region's four transit agencies - facilitated a partnership between DDOT and SMART to jointly operate two regional express bus routes.

The two newly formed express bus lines called "refleX" – a combination of the words "regional," "flexibility," and "express" – connected two busy corridors between downtown Detroit and its northern suburbs. Operational responsibility was divided by line – DDOT was responsible for the Woodward route from Detroit to Troy in Oakland County and SMART operated the Gratiot route to Mt. Clemens in Macomb County.

RefleX provided inter-county express service with fewer stops and faster travel times. The service eliminated the need to transfer, meaning a trip that once took two-hours and included a transfer, turned into a one-hour direct ride.

The new service, part of a three-year pilot program with an average cost of $5.6 million a year, included rebranding of the express buses in distinguishable teal and blue, installation of new shelters, and expanded operations running every 45 minutes, seven days a week. RefleX fares retained their lead agency's respective fare structures, at $1.50 for DDOT and $2 for SMART. The pilot was funded by the RTA through state transportation dollars and further supported through collected fares. All fare revenues went back into supporting the refleX service.

What worked well? What were the challenges?

Critics of the refleX service argued that it was a duplicative service as express buses were unnecessary because local routes already served the areas. Other criticism was rooted in the allocation of resources with some critics saying funding for express buses would better be used for more frequent bus service in other underserved areas of Detroit.

The 45-minute wait times were still an issue for riders however the seven day a week service was a major positive that improved consistent, daily service options.

However, the greatest immediate challenge was the funding sustainability of the three-year pilot. Despite regional transit expansion being a priority in the RTA's regional master plan, the failure to secure funding in a 2016 millage and the inability to get a similar four-county initiative to the ballot in 2018 meant that the refleX pilot program ended after the state's transportation funding commitment expired.

Regional transit options are still a priority for the RTA and the local neighboring agencies. In Spring of 2018, SMART began to run similar express service in the same two corridors while expanding their service to a third corridor connecting to the region's airport. Despite the end of the refleX service, ridership continues to grow as regional mobility options and access improves. In fact, the new SMART service has improved frequency in the corridors to every 15 minutes leading to increased ridership despite the downward trends seen nationwide.

Another major step forward in improved operational coordination occurred in 2019 when DDOT and SMART expanded their partnership through a unified payment system that eliminated transfer fees and allowed riders to pay a $2 fare for unlimited rides on both systems up to four hours.

Local Context

- The RTA's Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) identified three regional corridors – Veterans/Airport/Canal/Tulane, the Elmwood/S. Claiborne, and the West Bank Expressway – where high capacity, high frequency transit is badly needed. Agreements around joint operations in those corridors could be an important way to take the next step on better regional transit service for New Orleans.

<u>Case Study: Raleigh-Durham Triangle</u>

Lesson Learned: Gradually increasing regional coordination and integration leads to a better rider experience and helps to make the case for increased funding

Summary

Building off of past coordination, the Raleigh-Durham Research Triangle counties were able to pass a series of transit referendums between 2011 and 2016 to fund and implement the region's shared transit vision. Most local transit agencies also united around a successful "GoTransit" rebranding of the various agencies that made service easier to understand and consistent from a rider perspective and expanded coordinated regional planning and services.

The three counties that make up the Raleigh-Durham Research Triangle are Wake, Durham, and Orange counties and each have independent transit agencies serving jurisdictions within each county. In 1991, to better connect the three counties the state legislature created “Triangle Transit” - a new transit agency to focus on regional planning and provide cross county travel via bus and vanpool services. The legislation funded Triangle Transit through a five-dollar vehicle registration fee. From then on, Triangle Transit has provided inter-county service while the other county agencies supplemented Triangle Transit’s regional service at the local level.

The Triangle Transit Authority created a long-term transit plan with a guiding vision to better connect major job centers in a quickly growing region like the area’s large universities and the largest cities of Raleigh, Durham, Cary, and Chapel Hill.

Inter-transit agency cooperation became a priority to implement this vision. Ultimately, this required additional resources to fund better regional transit and thus emerged the “GoForward” campaign.

GoForward North Carolina promoted a community investment in transit through a series of voter approved referendums. From 2011 to 2016 Wake, Durham, and Orange counties each passed half-cent funding initiatives to realize this regional vision and leverage local dollars to receive additional federal funding. The GoForward investments fund the primary goals of:

- Expanding local and regional bus and vanpooling services
- Improving bus stops and shelters
- Implementing Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)
- Building a 37-mile inter-county commuter rail system
- Prioritizing regional service planning
- Unifying regional fare structures including free fares for children under 18.

As the GoForward campaign was progressing, four of the main transit agencies also successfully adopted a joint “GoTransit” branding in 2015. The agencies are now known as GoRaleigh (formerly Capital Area Transit (CAT)); GoDurham (formerly Durham Area Transit (DATA)) and GoCary (formerly Cary Transit (C-Tran)). Triangle Transit, the inter-county regional provider, became GoTriangle.

All four agencies remain independent but now share new branding in vehicle appearance, logos, uniforms, and joint fare structure that from a rider’s perspective looks and acts as one unified system, with additional funding to support the expanded coordination and service. The unified rebranding also applied to the respective websites, social media, and to paratransit services around the region.

What worked well? What were the challenges?

With a dedicated focus on improved regional transit service over a period of years, the Triangle counties were able to pass the funding initiatives and share resource responsibilities to pursue their greater regional vision. A critical first step was establishing a regional agency that continued autonomy for local jurisdictions but provided a shared vision and ability to better communicate and coordinate regional service.

But even after the formation of Triangle Transit/GoTriangle, it's important to recognize that passing the funding referendums took time, especially in the case of Wake County. Wake was the first county to have state approval to bring the half-cent referendum to the ballot in 2009 but the last to get voter approval. Anti-transit politicians within in the county blocked it for several years from being put on the ballot. It took repeated efforts in 2012 and 2014 to get the initiative to voters and when it did in 2016 it successfully passed.

The GoTransit rebranding was successful and continues to improve the rider experience through integrated advancements. However, not every transit provider opted in. Chapel Hill Transit – the smallest of the region's transit agencies – did not participate in the rebranding and it is unclear if it will opt-in in the future.

Since each branch of the GoTriangle system is responsible for its own budget and investment decisions, providing similar amenities and keeping equipment consistent across agency is another challenge. Standardizing the fare collection system remains difficult in the short-term, with different timelines for integrating fare collection technology. This adds complexity to the overall fare structure with different fare prices for different agencies despite their similar branding. GoTriangle and the Wake agencies (GoRaleigh and GoCary) will integrate their fare technology later in 2019. However, Durham is still in question and Chapel Hill's system – still outside the GoTransit brand - is free.

The continued local autonomy presents another challenge as there have been political disputes at the state and local levels about how the funds from the various municipal transit initiatives should be directed. That has at times threatened additional federal funding. No loss of major federal funding has yet occurred, but such disputes have potential to alter local projects. This occurred in the Spring of 2019 when political disagreements derailed a 17.7-mile inter-county light-rail line between Durham and Orange Counties that would have connected Chapel Hill and Durham.

Despite the challenges, the Research Triangle example has a lot to offer as a regional model. There are strong regional plans directing growing transit investments to benefit the region and better connect major job centers and universities.

Local Context

- The capacity to integrate inter-Parish service is here as the RTA is already a state enabled regional transit authority. The LA Legislature could also enable and fund a new entity to focus on regional connectivity.

- Passing a ballot initiative takes time and will encounter political hurdles. Persistence and patience are needed in order to secure funding for the long term.

Case Study: San Diego

Lesson Learned: Multiple agencies can become a single entity to deliver more efficient regional transit service

Summary

Over the course of almost 30 years, multiple transit agencies in the San Diego region became steadily more integrated until they formally became one agency. Each agency grew gradually closer as their relationships evolved from unified branding, marketing, and shared fare structures to initial planning and operational joint agreements to formalized unification of coordinated planning and services.

The movement started in the 1970s, when the San Diego region formed the Metropolitan Transit Development Board **(**MTDB) to study, plan, fund, and build a trolley system that crossed jurisdictional lines.

Fully staffed and well-respected by the region's other transit agencies, MTDB began convening the agencies regularly on other regional issues and took a leading role in forging compromise and cooperation.

Gradually, the convenings led to operating agreements that began through informal joint powers agreements and MOUs. Through the early 1990s, a focused marketing strategy established identical bus branding, marketing, and regional fare structures and, therefore formed the public perception of a single agency. This evolved into the steady consolidation of transit services of the various jurisdictions until coming together into a unified single transit agency.

The ultimate step occurred in 2003 when state legislation both shifted the responsibilities of MTDB (now San Diego Metropolitan Transit System or MTS) into the operations and service planning of the regional bus and rail systems and consolidated all large-scale capital planning, strategy, development, and, construction responsibilities with the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the regional MPO. This 2003 agreement finalized and formalized what had been a growing series of informal operating agreements.

The consolidation of agencies in 2003 created one unified governance body that allowed for more coordinated service planning resulting in an expansion of regional bus and rail service. It also kicked off a larger Comprehensive Operations Analysis (COA) to evaluate and address service needs throughout the region.

What worked well? What were the challenges?

Despite the unified look and branding of MTS/MTDB, it took decades of coordination and finally state legislation to formally centralize decision making, planning, and operations. Now unified, consolidation protects the regional vision over the long-term.

Despite this regional transformation, there are on-going challenges. The result of consolidation has left MTS with three different pension plans and different unions with varied work agreements and rules.

Coordinating capital programs between SANDAG the governing body and MTS the agency responsible for operating the projects has been an issue. That is particularly true with replenishing and growing capital funds as the agency budgets for aging infrastructure throughout the system. Another consistent theme has been the challenge of operational funding - attaining resources to sustain and expand transit operations and projects.

In the process of integration two things stood out - the catalyzing impact of regional rail service and leadership's role in bringing the separate entities together rather than creating conflict and competition for resources. As the service expanded it created opportunities for both coordination and confrontation. However, a general managers group was created to improve communication across the various regional agencies and help facilitate disagreements. As the system expanded, the director of MTS/MTDB was able to communicate the economy of scale benefits that led to cost savings and additional service that helped build the partnerships and political will for the foundation of integration.

Local Context

- The political climate favors some of the initial steps in the San Diego case study as the New Orleans City Council and Jefferson Council have unanimously passed joint resolutions supporting and expanding regional connectivity.
- The region can build off of current partnerships between JeT and RTA – Regional Ride Day Pass, coordinated call center that serves both Orleans and Jefferson Parishes, extending the #39 Tulane Bus to Ochsner Medical Center – to expand regional planning and service coordination.
- Large potential projects – like expanding transit connections to Louis Armstrong International Airport – could serve as a catalyst for greater regional transit integration.