



By METRO Staff

Find out how operations across North America, from Edmonton, Alberta, to Mobile, Ala., boosted ridership, increased productivity and improved customer service by making small and large changes.

## Wichita Transit

Renewal of purpose, equipment and infrastructure lifts Kansas system out of doldrums of the late 1990s.

Located near the dead center of the United States, Wichita, Kan., seemed to have a bull's-eye on its back when it came to revenue shortfalls and budget deficits in the mid-1990s.

Wichita Transit, in particular, was hard hit. It saw its budget cut by more than 30%, leading to service reductions, an operating deficit of more than \$1 million and a bus fleet with an average age of 17 years.

The outlook was so bleak that the City Council considered such alternatives as using school buses for route service and dropping public transportation altogether.

But things started turning around in the late 1990s, beginning with renewed support of the City Council, the community and transit management.

"A strategic plan was developed that encompassed a myriad of steps, including local support, funding security, a revamped infrastructure and redevelopment of business practices," says Jay Banasiak, general manager of Wichita Transit.

That plan translated into several key steps toward revitalization:

- Approval of a long-range plan and tax commitment that was maximized to the full \$2 million levy.
- Construction of a \$7 million operations facility.



Wichita Transit has upgraded its fleet and constructed a new operations center since the City Council implemented a strategic plan developed in the late 1990s.

- Replacement of 76% of the bus fleet, 70% of the van fleet and 40% of the trolley fleet.
- Revamped business practices for maintenance, ADA service, farebox collection, ridership analysis, safety and security programs and labor relations.

And more is planned. "We are making ridership our No. 1 priority," says Banasiak, who has seen a 10.7% gain in 2004 so far.

"The transformation from a below-average system to a modern transit service operation has been remarkable and one of community pride," says Chris Cherches, who was Wichita's city manager for 18 years before leaving the post late last year.

— STEVE HIRANO



## Ben Franklin Transit

Community's support of a sales tax hike helps restore once-ample funding levels.

In the late 1990s, **Ben Franklin Transit** in Richland, Wash., was fully staffed, equipped with a well-maintained fleet of new buses and recognized as one of the better-run transit operations in the state of Washington. Logging 5 million annual boardings in a tri-city area (Richland, Pasco, Kennewick) with a population of only 175,000, it's safe to say that the agency enjoyed a period of prosperity. But circumstances changed.

In 1999, a series of state funding cuts resulted in Ben Franklin's budget being reduced by nearly half. During the next three years, the agency's once-gaudy ridership numbers decreased by 25%. Staff was downsized, routes were canceled and overall service levels were scaled back by 15%. Those were hard times, recalls General Manager **Tim Fredrickson**.

"By using reserves we had built up for vehicle replacement and facility expansion, we were able to hold the line for a couple of years," he says. "But we eventually had to tell the community that our public transit services were in jeopardy."

The people responded. Voting in favor of a sales tax hike that increased transit funding, the community helped turn the fortunes of the economically beleaguered operation. Says Fredrickson, "The community really stepped up and showed their sentiment."



*After drastic funding decreases, followed by a dip in ridership, Ben Franklin Transit was assisted by a concerned community.*

Since the tax increase, the agency has pushed ridership up 5% and expects continued growth. Staffing ballooned from 160 employees to 210 in just a few months, and another hiring phase is planned for this summer. Additionally, preparations are being made for the construction of a new transit center. But perhaps the greatest improvement lies in the perspectives of the agency's employees.

"The people who were here and stuck it out during the tough times have a greater esprit and sense of how good and resilient this organization is," says Fredrickson. "There is now a greater sense of future in the organization that makes people want to be even better and more effective."

— JOEY CAMPBELL

## Nashua Transit System

System uses mobility manager to reach community, handle customer concerns.

Listening to customers' concerns helped turn around the **Nashua (N.H.) Transit System (NTS)** over the past three years, increasing services and boosting ridership.

NTS completely reinvented its route system with the help of a newly hired mobility manager and through conducting customer surveys. The mobility manager is involved in extensive community outreach and takes care of customer concerns from start to finish.

"We really listen to what our customers have to say," says **John Whittaker**, NTS' general manager. "With our new routes we've experienced a 12% increase in ridership."

NTS added new and improved bus routes, a program for people on welfare, a travel training program on how to ride fixed routes, training for developmentally disabled adults, schedules in Spanish and Braille and extended hours into the evening.

Whittaker says the evening hours came about as customers complained "the city kind of rolled up its streets after 6:45 p.m., and they had no way to get around."

Now, with buses running until 11 p.m. during the week, people who work late can take the bus home instead of a cab.

The agency is also working with the **Boys and Girls Club of Greater Nashua** to introduce a peer-tutoring train-the-trainer system.



*Nashua Transit offers a travel training program and provides bus schedules in Spanish and Braille.*

"We realized that young people aren't being taught to ride," Whittaker says. "Everyone is so reliant on the automobile that we figured if we can show kids that riding the bus is a cool thing to do at a young age, maybe they'll become riders as adults."

To update its fleet and accommodate the expected increase in ridership, NTS purchased seven 30-foot **Gillig** buses and 12 **EIDorado** cutaway vans in December 2001.

Whittaker says NTS will continue its community outreach, looking at further increasing ridership and trying to get better funding.

After all, he says, "It doesn't pay to have a nice bus driving around empty all day long. We need to have happy passengers on the bus."

— YVONNE KLOPPING



## Chatham Area Transit Authority

Savannah, Ga., system bridges service gap with ferry system.

**T**he Chatham Area Transit Authority (CATA) now carries passengers by land and by water with the addition of its new Savannah Belles Ferry System.

In May 2003, CATA began the new service to make the newly built convention center across the river on Hutchison Island more accessible. "It's not terribly easy to get to by car, and you have to take a rather long route," says CATA Executive Director **Scott Lansing**. "Most of the hotels were located on the other side of the river, so it was the easiest way to connect people coming to the convention center."

Since the May 2003 inception of the ferry service, which carries 100 passengers on each of two ADA-compliant vessels, overall ridership for the system has increased by more than 3%.

Another significant factor in the ridership gains was the purchase of 31 new low-floor **Gillig** buses at a cost of \$8 million. "This made our entire 51-bus fleet 100% wheelchair accessible for the first time," Lansing says. In keeping with its new accessibility, CATA is spending an estimated \$1 million on 100 bus shelters and making bus stops accessible as well.

Other system improvements include the translation of key bus route information and interior bus card information



**CATA's ferry service, which carries 100 passengers on each of two ADA-compliant vessels, has helped boost overall system ridership by more than 3%.**

into Spanish. Schedules and maps were also made more accessible to the visually impaired with special versions available on CATA's Website.

CATA also has plans to implement a point-to-point, on-demand taxi service for wheelchair users to complement its paratransit service, which requires advanced scheduling. "We bought three lift-equipped minivans, and we want to find a private operator like a taxi service to operate it for us," says Lansing.

Educating children about the benefits of public transportation is also a priority, apparent from an ongoing weekly field trip program during which students are given a ride on a bus and tours of the CATA facility.

—JANNA STARCIC

## North County Transit District

Growing rail and bus fleet enhances Oceanside, Calif., service.

**W**hen San Diego played host to the 2003 Super Bowl, the North County Transit District (NCTD) carried a record-breaking 15,000 passengers on its Coaster trains to and from the city. Although deemed a success, the event pointed out that the system needed to grow its fleet. "We had every piece of equipment out on the tracks to carry as many people as we could," says **Tom Kelleher**, NCTD spokesman.

In a deal several years in the making, the agency got its wish in August and took delivery of six new **Bombardier** coaches for the Coaster line at a cost of \$12 million. "We brought our total number of coaches up to 28, and that makes a difference to an agency that wants to add more service and handle more special events," says Kelleher.

On the fixed-route bus side, the system acquired 23 new CNG buses, bringing its fleet total to 164 buses. In addition, the NCTD received federal funding to expand its CNG fueling station to support the growing fleet.

More system improvements included a complete revamping of its existing routes by increasing frequency on more heavily used routes and cutting back on under-performing routes. The agency also instituted a time transfer



**The agency revamped its existing routes by increasing frequency on heavily used routes and cutting back under-performing ones. It also instituted a transfer system that minimizes waiting time.**

system at its transfer centers. "Buses will pulse out of the transit centers on the hour and the half hour and pulse back in 10 to 20 minutes later, so passengers have minimal waiting time. The idea behind it was to keep people moving," says Kelleher.

To further expand its service horizons, the NCTD will purchase 12 Siemens DMU (diesel multiple units) vehicles, valued at \$50 million, for its new 22-mile Sprinter light rail line project. "We have a request for bid out for the mainline construction, and we expect to begin work on the line later this summer," Kelleher says.

—JANNA STARCIC



## Clay County Transit

Customized vehicles help negotiate a service area that includes 5,000 dirt roads.

**D**irt roads and elderly passengers are just two of the many challenges **Clay County** (Fla.) **Transit** faces every day. Handling 5,000 dirt roads and dealing with a population comprising 15% elderly residents, are bound to be ongoing tasks, says **Sheryl Hartzog**, transportation coordinator.

Because 30% of Clay County's roads are unpaved, Hartzog says many vehicle changes had to be made. Vehicles were designed with a softer suspension, larger alternators, spill-cage construction and dual rear wheels for stability on dirt roads. Air conditioning systems — a necessity in Florida — were split into a dual compressor so that if one system were to break down in the front, the rear one would take over, she says.

Most of the accommodations resulted in more comfort for the elderly, who make up a large percentage of the ridership, she says. Also added to the fleet were cutaway vehicles built with a wider center aisle, a lower step and a wider, transit-style doorway for easier accessibility.

"I think we're satisfied with our vehicles, with the design, comfort and the accessibility for the disabled people to get in and out as well as the elderly," Hartzog says.



**Because 30% of Clay County's roads are unpaved, vehicles have a softer suspension, larger alternators and dual rear wheels.**

In the works are more improvements to better help the elderly who have lost their independence after losing their driver's licenses, says **Renee Knight**, executive director. The transit system has a smart card program that helps identify seniors, and even children, riding the buses. Added to that are plans to have a GPS system installed to track vehicles, as well as driver performance.

In addition to vehicle improvements, Clay County Transit took it a step further to improve its driver-training and drug and alcohol programs, which the **Federal Transit Administration** noted should be modeled statewide, says **Gwendolyn Pra**, district transit project manager.

— JACLYN ROCO



## Edmonton Transit System

Integration of services and a consistent visual identity simplifies use of Canadian operation.

**F**or Canada's **Edmonton Transit System (ETS)**, being considered "most improved" required more than a minor tinkering in operations. Instead, a major tune-up was required: a whole change of corporate identity.

"We try to meet the customer needs — make it simple and try to help them use our services and know the benefits," says **Patricia Waisman**, ETS director of business development.

Serving a ridership estimated at 46 million last year proves to be a continuous effort, she says. Integrating Edmonton's services (which includes 802 buses and trolleys, 37 light rail cars and 123 employee and contracted vehicles for the Disabled Adult Transportation Services [DATS]) became Waisman's project. A crucial part of the project meant knowing more about the customers and their needs.

And customers needed to know that transit was viable as an option through consistency, Waisman says. "I think where we have changed substantially is to develop and strengthen the integration and consistent use of a single visual identity across our system." In 2002, only 22% of citizens knew light rail was owned and operated by Edmonton Transit, and 13% of citizens knew the DATS was owned and operated by ETS.



**Ninety-four percent of Edmonton Transit customers are very satisfied with its services.**

Through integration, Waisman's aim was to get rid of the confusion that had customers questioning ETS' services.

To gauge more of what customers needed, Waisman and her team sent out customer satisfaction surveys regularly. "Ninety-three to 94% of our customers are very satisfied with our services," Waisman says.

Waisman says ETS will continue to find new ways to put its image front and center (like offering free rides for holidays). "When you look at bus stops, you see the color schemes; you look at the buses; you look at the transit centers. It's that continual visual effect and reminder that we're here, she says."

— JACLYN ROCO



## Metro Transit

Ridership in Mobile, Ala., benefits from bus purchases, improved customer service

It took a carefully thought out strategic plan to rev up **Metro Transit** enough for needed improvements. Momentum eventually shifted, leading the agency to create a more pronounced presence in the Mobile, Ala., community, with an increased ridership of 3.8% last year.

“Our goal is to increase our ridership by 10% a year for the next three years,” says **Paula B. Dicks**, marketing director.

Dicks says a multilayered approach was used to increase ridership. Twenty-two new buses equipped with fare boxes and aid equipment for the disabled were purchased to help improve customer service functions.

Improving customer service and ridership were the major objectives behind hiring a communications firm to develop a new image. Additionally, moving into a renovated, centralized train station has facilitated more face-to-face interaction with customers.

As part of its 2004 Transit Improvement Plan, Metro Transit added more services with a personal approach. “We expanded our services into neighborhoods where we were not providing service, removed parts of routes that had no riders and increased service frequency on 50% of our system,” Dicks says.



***Metro Transit's maintenance department streamlined its operations by getting rid of old parts and equipment, and is launching a total renovation of a repair facility.***

Efficiency was another main concern, resulting in plans to address productivity and company savings. A savings of up to 75% was realized through increased productivity and through the purchase of new route scheduling software by the agency's new brokered paratransit department. “The maintenance department has streamlined its operations by getting rid of old parts and equipment and is launching a total renovation of a repair facility,” Dicks says.

Metro Transit also continues to partner with public transportation stakeholders to create beneficial projects. Efforts include the launch of a fixed route and free downtown shuttle service.

— JACLYN ROCO



## Palm Tran

Travel training program alleviates paratransit use, reduces costs.

Focusing on the basics — a safe, clean, comfortable ride on the bus — has always been a priority for **Palm Tran** in Palm Beach County, Fla. By simply focusing its efforts on one route, which accounts for nearly 25% of the agency's ridership, a gain of 12.5% in ridership was recorded in the 2003 fiscal year.

"According to our customer surveys, the highest priority of riders was an increased frequency of buses," says Palm Tran Executive Director **Perry Maull**. The agency responded by boosting the frequency on the number one route, from every 30 to every 20 minutes. The system also extended the service hours from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. on its top three routes, which make up nearly 50% of its ridership.

Palm Tran has been able to make other system enhancements with the use of six service development grants in the amount of \$530,400 awarded by the **Florida Department of Transportation** (FDOT). Part of this sum is being used to equip all buses with an enhanced stoplight system to help reduce rear-end collisions, which were a frequent problem. In addition to the standard brake lights, an additional red light flashes the word "stop" when brakes are ap-



***Palm Tran has equipped buses with a flashing red 'stop' light to help reduce rear-end collisions.***

plied. "This will further reduce our rear-end accidents," says Maull. "Any time you have an accident, even if it's not your fault, you are interrupting service."

Another program being funded by the FDOT grants involves teaching developmentally disabled patrons how to use the fixed-route system. "Because of the nature of the service, every additional trip is a real cost to us, so anything we can do to move riders over to the fixed-route service is beneficial," says Maull. "It's an advantage financially for ADA-qualifying passengers because riding fixed-route is free for them."

— JANNA STARCIC



## Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission

Woodbridge, Va., incentive program improves customer service, reduces operator turnover.

In the past three years, ridership on the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission's (PRTC) local and express bus services — Omni Link and Omni Ride — nearly doubled. Ridership on its express bus service alone went from 670,000 annually in 2000 to 1.2 million in 2003. This substantial boost can be partly attributed to the improvement of the quality of the system's bus fleet, says PRTC Executive Director Al Harf. "The average age of the fleet has gone from 14-plus years to two years."

Improved customer service also played a part in increasing ridership numbers for the PRTC. The commission, which out-sources its operating and maintenance work, includes an incentive provision within its contracts that rewards excellence in customer service. "This provision [enables] the contractor to earn as much as \$25,000 for our Ride service, and as much as \$25,000 for our Link service if they are able to increase the incidences of people who respond to our customer surveys that the service is excellent," Harf says.



**Customers can now download schedule and route information from PRTC's Website to handheld PDAs.**

While the incentive program is not new, it was primarily used to penalize the contractor for lapses in service.

Besides improved customer service, the incentive program has been beneficial in reducing operator turnover, which historically was very high. "We have an incentive in place that rewards the contractor if they are able to confine operator turnover to 20% or less for the year."

Another customer service enhancement recently introduced is the ability for customers to download schedule and route information from PRTC's Website to PDAs. "We hope to provide customers real-time information in the future." The site, a third-generation design, also offers a more sophisticated trip itinerary planner, Harf says.

— JANNA STARCIC