Greatest Growth in Unlinked Trips

While many of those in our Top 10 increased greatly percentage-wise, there are those agencies that made a significant jump in unlinked passenger trips between 1999 and 2000. Here they are:

1. New York City Transit 156,964,000
2. Toronto Transit Commission 31,487,000
3. Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority 27,237,000
4. Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority 15,165,000
5. San Francisco Bay Area RTD 11,517,000
6. Montreal Urban Community Transit Corp. 9,192,000
7. Chicago Transit Authority 8,589,000
8. OC Transpo 7,584,000
9. Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority 7,233,000
10. Port Authority of New York & New Jersey 7,009,000

Source: APTA

Small to medium-sized transit properties are showing the greatest percentage growth, while their larger cousins are posting the biggest absolute gains (see chart). Here's a look at the top percentage gainers...

By METRO STAFF

Public transportation ridership recently reached its highest level in 40 years, according to statistics from the American Public Transportation Association. Last year, Americans took an estimated 9.4 billion trips on public transportation, an increase of 3.5% over 1999. Over the past five years, ridership has seen a robust 21% growth.

Of course, some transit agencies have experienced greater ridership growth than others, due to a wide variety of circumstances. To examine some of the forces that have lifted ridership to unprecedented levels, we’ve profiled 10 of the fastest-growing transit agencies in North America (based on percentage of ridership growth in calendar year 2000 vs. 1999).
Bloomington Public Transportation Corp.
Bloomington, Ind.

Reaching out to the college student market has played a major role in ridership gains for Bloomington Transit (BT), the fixed-route transit service division of Bloomington Public Transportation Corp.

In 2000, ridership reached 1.37 million, a 25.5% increase from 1999. General Manager Lewis May projects a 21% increase to 1.75 million for 2001. He says an arrangement with Indiana University that allows students to ride any BT bus by showing school ID is the biggest factor in BT’s ridership growth.

“Many students live off campus in apartment complexes, contributing to increased traffic congestion and creating a high demand for on-campus parking,” says May. The U-Pass program, made possible by a transportation fee paid by students along with their regular semester costs, has helped combat the congestion and parking problems and create a stable market niche for BT. Indiana University enrollment tops 35,000, with faculty and staff totaling 7,000.

BT has also developed an alternative to park-and-ride service, where students can leave their cars at a nearby city park and catch a shuttle bus that runs every 12 minutes. “We’re providing a convenient and frequent service to the campus,” says May.

Besides the campus programs, student transportation fees have also helped fund a number of new services for BT, such as providing a route on Sundays, late night service till 12:30 a.m. and increased frequency of one route from every 60 minutes to every 30.

“As the city has grown we have kept up the pace by expanding our service to new areas in the city,” says May. BT added nine more buses to its fleet, totaling 33, to keep up with the growth. BT is planning to purchase three 40-foot low-floor buses for delivery next year.

VITAL STATS
- Ridership (2000) 1,370,000
- Ridership growth 25.5%
- Fleet 33 buses
- Revenue hours (2000) 61,755
- Website www.bloomingtontransit.com

An arrangement with Indiana University has helped Bloomington Transit post impressive ridership gains in the past year.

Bowling Green Public Transit
Bowling Green, Ky.

Although it is a very small system (only four buses in a seven-vehicle fleet), operating in a rural area with a population of only 50,000, Bowling Green Public Transit (BGPT) has held its own by increasing ridership with the coordination of services to make routes more efficient.

BGPT, a division of Community Action of Southern Kentucky, which manages 15 additional programs, covers 35 square miles and about 269 miles of road in Bowling Green.

Comparing numbers from January to June, ridership has grown 32% in 2000, going from 10,722 trips to 15,957. Numbers for 2001 have already jumped 8.6% with a projected year-end total of 35,000 trips.

“We continue to focus on integrating the general public and transit by altering our two routes to accommodate riders participating in other contracted services that we manage to maximize vehicle service,” says Donald Butler Ph.D., executive director for Community Action. “Coordinating services coupled with our demand response paratransit service has contributed significantly to the growth.”

Another key factor in ridership growth was BGPT’s participation in a new statewide system of transporting Medicaid patients. “We saw additional riders that we were not seeing before that were referred to us through the brokerage system,” says Butler.

Though it has been important to market BGPT as a service to the general public as a whole, and not solely for participants in Community Action programs, BGPT relies heavily on customer feedback and demographic data to get information about the community’s transportation needs. BGPT also depends on a strong network of support agencies and organizations, such as doctor’s offices and physical rehabilitation centers, to provide insight on clients needing transportation service.

This year, BGPT plans to expand service to a third route, increasing overall frequency on existing routes. Also in the works is the arrival of five more buses in 2002.

VITAL STATS
- Ridership (1st half, 2000) 10,722
- Ridership growth 32%
- Fleet 7 vehicles
- Service area 35 square miles
- Population served 50,000

Bowling Green Public Transit increased ridership 32% in 2000 by making routes more efficient.
Centre Area Transportation Authority
State College, Pa.

Steady, robust growth in ridership has become almost routine for the Centre Area Transportation Authority (CATA) in State College, Pa. For the past six years CATA has registered double-digit percentage increases, including an impressive 37% hike in passengers trips in 2000.

The reason for this healthy growth, says CATA General Manager Hugh Mose, is an expansion of service offered to Penn State University, whose students comprise about 80% of the agency’s passengers, both in and around the campus as well as to and from peripheral suburbs.

For example, ridership along campus and campus-adjacent routes has tripled in the past two years. This spectacular rise is easily explained. The 40-cent fare for these two routes was absorbed by the university in an agreement with the agency, leading to a burst in interest among cash-strapped students. “Just the simple act of removing that 40-cent fare caused ridership to triple,” Mose says. “In fact, ridership became so heavy that we had to add a third route on campus.”

The other key factor in the ridership growth is what Mose calls the “suburbanization” of student housing. “When I was in college, very few people had cars,” he says. “Most of them lived on campus or nearby. That’s not true anymore.”

These days students are more apt to live in suburbs that are not within campus walking distance. These students, Mose explains, are discouraged from driving to class because of limited campus parking space and the prohibitive cost of parking permits. “Parking is either expensive or not convenient, so they choose to ride the bus,” he says.

To accommodate Penn State students who live in large apartment complexes in State College and the six other municipalities in CATA’s service area, the transit agency negotiated agreements with several landlords to subsidize bus service. CATA has about $600,000 worth of subsidy contracts with seven complexes.

CityBus of Greater Lafayette
Lafayette, Ind.

After a name change and a facelift, the Greater Lafayette Public Transportation Corp., now known as CityBus, has the added distinction of being one of METRO’s fastest-growing transit agencies. “We have taken aggressive measures to improve the overall quality of the entire transit system,” says John Metzinger, manager of development.

Ridership has made great strides over the past two years with 1.7 million in 1998 and 2.8 million in 2000, a surge of 39%. CityBus expects to surpass the 3 million mark for FY 2001. An unlimited access agreement reached with Purdue University in 1998 that provides students with convenient transportation to the campus is seen as having the most impact on ridership numbers.

In addition to targeting university students, CityBus wanted to develop new riders for the future by adopting a policy that allows kids under 18 to ride free. This program saw ridership increase 173% among young people.

CityBus has also benefited greatly from rebranding and repositioning itself in the marketplace. After a survey confirmed that the transit system’s original name proved too difficult to remember, the name CityBus was born. Along with the new name came a new logo and paint scheme for the 60-bus fleet, giving it a bright, clean look.

Drivers were also given a makeover with new uniforms that were more casual and modern. “The drivers love them, and I think if your drivers are happy, it’s going to reflect to the passengers,” says General Manager Martin B. Sennett.

Other changes that helped ridership growth were the restructuring of the maintenance department and hiring of a fleet manager. This effort to improve maintenance reduced road calls dramatically and increased the reliability of all buses. “Reliability has impacted ridership because people now know that they can depend on the bus,” says Metzinger.

A multimodal transit center built by CityBus in a joint effort with other transit agencies in the area brings together trains and buses, and also links bicycle and pedestrian traffic.
Golden Empire Transit District
Bakersfield, Calif.

Experiencing its fifth consecutive year of double-digit ridership growth, the Golden Empire Transit District (GET) believes in improving its quality of service more than anything else.

“Our major focus is on increasing the quality of service, and a ridership increase naturally follows,” says CEO Chester Moland.

Apparently, that decree worked, as GET surpassed the 7 million riders mark for the first time in fiscal year 2001. The quality of service was bettered by improving headways on the busiest routes and purchasing new, alternative-fueled vehicles.

GET takes much pride in the strides it takes to be environmentally aware, making a commitment to not purchase any more diesel buses. It has 17 CNG buses on order, and 240 bus benches are constructed from recycled plastic milk jugs. The administrative building of the agency also makes an effort to recycle and conserve energy. “Given that we bill ourselves as the pollution solution, it’s incumbent upon us to be the leader in environmental issues,” Moland says.

GET was privately operated until the early ’60s, when the City of Bakersfield took over operations. Soon after, in 1973, the GET District was formed, operating independently from the state and city it serves.

To help garner good will, GET puts a lot of emphasis into marketing itself. Public outreach is done for any new services. It even partners with other agencies to expand its regular service, like running late-evening services for those transitioning from welfare to work.

GET is working on entering the technological era, with an RFP out to equip buses with AVL technology and automatic passenger counters. It’s also looking to add real-time displays at bus terminals.

Despite all of the changes going on, Moland hopes to maintain an atmosphere of friendliness. All employees must take an eight-hour training course on just how to give the highest level of customer service.

VITAL STATS

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<td>155 square miles</td>
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<td>Operating budget</td>
<td>(2001-2002) $14.9 million</td>
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More than 92 part-time coach operators joined GET Bus this year as it embarked on a major recruitment effort.

Grande Prairie Transit
Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada

By focusing on customer needs, Grande Prairie Transit (GPT) has reaped the rewards with new and more frequent riders on its buses. In recent years, Canadian transit agencies have seen steady ridership increases, most notably the 17% leap taken by GPT in 2000, with 419,000 riders compared to 349,000 in 1999. The forecast for 2001 is 470,000 riders, an 11% increase from last year. With a total of 11 buses, including seven low-floor vehicles, GPT covers just over 16 square miles.

Conducting an extensive review of the transit system coupled with talking to riders and non-riders was key to the many changes implemented by GPT. “I think that the success in terms of the increase in ridership has been due to really paying attention to our riders’ needs as well as understanding what it would take to get people using transit more,” says Bernd Manz, public works director for GPT.

One of the changes implemented was extending hours of service to begin earlier in the day and run later in the evening to accommodate students taking evening classes and riders using transit to get to work. GPT also reduced hours of midday service to minimize the cost impacts of service improvements.

Other considerations made for Grande Prairie riders were the addition of Sunday and holiday service and route changes to serve growing commercial and industrial areas. “We are a community that is experiencing strong growth and there were areas of the city that were not being served by transit,” says Manz.

GPT also saw an opportunity to shift more student use onto the transit system by developing a discounted school pass costing $20 a month. Manz sees GPT as a faster and more convenient alternative to the yellow school bus because of shorter and more varied routes.

Manz believes that a combination of all improvements has been instrumental in ridership growth for GPT.

VITAL STATS

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<td>Fleet</td>
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<td>Service area</td>
<td>16 square miles</td>
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<td>Population served</td>
<td>36,000</td>
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River Valley Metro Mass Transit District
Kankakee, Ill.

Growth in ridership has been remarkable—and unremarkable—at River Valley Metro Mass Transit District (Metro) in Kankakee, Ill. Yes, the agency posted a remarkable 136.7% increase in ridership in 2000. But it must be noted that this agency is only 3 years old and has barely unfolded its wings.

Mike Prior, Metro’s managing director, isn’t apologizing for the agency’s immaturity as it relates to its heady percentage growth. Metro, he says, has been highly aggressive in marketing its services, using three newspapers, two radio stations and a cable television outlet to impress its motto—“Your ride is here”—on the public.

“We’ve been telling people that transit’s a good thing,” Prior says. “And I think they’re starting to agree.”

For example, the service level of Metro’s paratransit buses has almost doubled over the past year. Prior credits the aforementioned marketing campaign as well as positive word of mouth. In fact, the campaign has worked too well, creating an overabundance of service demand. To help lighten the load, Prior says he is working with a local social service agency to transition some of these paratransit riders to fixed-route service.

Another contributing factor to the impressive growth in the past fiscal year was the addition of service to a key community. “That increased our population served by a considerable amount,” Prior says. “And I think they’re starting to agree.”

Despite the rapid growth in ridership, Prior says capacity is not a problem, at least not yet. What he would like to see is additional state funding to increase the frequency of most of the routes from hourly to every 30 minutes. “We feel the ridership is there,” he says. Metro operates 13 vehicles, eight large and five small buses.

Santa Clarita Transit
Santa Clarita, Calif.

For each of the 10 years it’s been in business, Santa Clarita Transit in Santa Clarita, Calif., has seen a marked increase in ridership.

Growing far beyond expectations this year, the agency increased ridership about 30%, carrying nearly 3 million riders. This July, the agency carried 210,000 riders, up from 165,000 in July 2000.

“We’ve put a high emphasis on increasing ridership,” says Transportation Manager Ron Kilcoyne. “It’s what drives everything we do.”

That growth might have something to do with the 22 new buses Santa Clarita added to its fleet, making it one of the more modern fleets in Los Angeles County and greatly increasing capacity. The agency also completely restructured its service to reduce transfer times.

Kilcoyne credits the unexpected growth to the agency’s focus on planning, marketing and quality. Though most marketing is geared toward adults, kids are targeted during the summer months. Currently, Santa Clarita is working on a marketing program based on customer testimonials to help show that people can make better use of their time on the bus by reading or getting work done.

“Over the years, we’ve focused on service and design,” he says. “We try to provide great service to some of the people rather than mediocre service to all of the people.”

The service is done with buses running every 30 minutes on all routes during operating hours. Kilcoyne says he also likes to have feeder service into those neighborhoods that don’t have regular service.

“We try to do as much as we can on a limited budget,” he says. By the end of this year, Santa Clarita will open a new permanent transfer station and complete the purchase of land for a new transit administration and maintenance facility. The facility, which Kilcoyne hopes to open in 2003, will allow the agency to double its size.
Sound Transit
Seattle, Wash.

There’s no question that Sound Transit belongs on this list, as it began as a concept in 1996 and now runs 14 express bus routes and four commuter trains, with light rail service in the works. “It’s a real testament to the board and staff to get so much service on the street and so fast,” says Joni Earl, who recently became Sound’s executive director.

Though it added more routes on its 2-year-old bus service, ridership on the existing routes jumped 17% from January to June 2000 to 2001. Taking into account the new routes, ridership increased 42% on the system.

Its Sounder rail service, which began last September, carries an average of 2,400 passengers daily on existing freight tracks. The number of trains running will increase to 15 round trips between Tacoma and Everett next year. Funding has also been secured for extending the length of the commuter rail to its full 82 miles.

The next big project for Sound is its light rail service, which has already seen a few setbacks while still in the planning stages, including decreasing the size of the line from 21 miles to between 12 and 16 miles. The system is slated to open during or before 2009 and will cost about $1 billion to build. Earl is hoping to break ground next spring and purchases are starting to be made on property and rights-of-way. Fortunately for the agency, the project has garnered much public support, with 66% believing light rail is a good solution to the region’s transportation problems.

VITAL STATS

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<tr>
<td>Ridership growth (rail)</td>
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Fleet 154 buses, 26 railcars
Website www.soundtransit.org

Triangle Transit Authority
Research Triangle Park, N.C.

It’s really no surprise that the Triangle Transit Authority (TTA) in North Carolina is one of the fastest-growing transit agencies in North America. After all, it serves one of the fastest-growing regions in the United States, the so-called Research Triangle in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area.

What’s surprising, however, is that none of the local transit agencies—Chapel Hill Transit, Durham Area Transit Authority and Capital Area Transit (Raleigh)—has expanded at anywhere near the same pace.

Jim Ritchie, TTA’s general manager, explains that the other transit agencies are older and more established than TTA, which began operation in 1993. And, as a regional transportation provider, TTA has a wider perspective than its locally based counterparts. Rather than provide service within any particular locale, it helps to connect the three local bus systems with what Ritchie calls quasi-express service.

Ritchie says the TTA has been around for seven years, but is still being “discovered” by many of the 1 million residents of the Research Triangle area. In the past year, it has added shuttle service, evening service and Saturday service. Helping to lure new passengers, the agency has ensured that all new buses delivered since 1998 have been equipped with bicycle racks. “Our bikes-on-buses program is doing extremely well,” Ritchie says.

The TTA recently added two new routes and bolstered its 35-bus fleet with 15 new vehicles. Next spring, the agency plans to increase the frequency of several core bus routes from hourly to every 30 minutes or 15 minutes.

Ritchie says further expansion is on the horizon. “We have a plan to increase our services from 25 peak vehicles in 2000 to 79 peak vehicles in 2005,” he says. And the TTA is currently reviewing comments on a draft environmental impact study for a regional light rail system that is scheduled for operation in 2008. The rail system is expected to carry 44,000 passengers a day by 2025. “The growth is all over the system,” Ritchie says.

VITAL STATS

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