

DEMAND-RESPONSIVE TRANSPORTATION AS SEEN BY THE TRANSIT WORKER

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Few challenges are more important to transit workers and their union representatives than to find ways and means of revitalizing public transportation in urban areas. A strong public transit system is essential to the economic and social health of cities. In addition, it represents to the transit worker his only chance for a secure job, earnings adequate to provide a decent standard of living, and the protection of a reasonable pension when his working years are over. Accordingly, for some years the Amalgamated Transit Union has eagerly searched for a remedy or remedies giving promise of rejuvenating public transportation as an economically viable institution.

We know that the real cause of the transit industry's ever-worsening economic position has not truly been the skyrocketing of labor costs in an inflationary era, although certainly those costs must be expected to climb more rapidly in a labor-intensive industry such as transit. The real economic difficulty, however, lies elsewhere: in the declining productivity of a fixed-route transit system that carries an ever-decreasing number of passengers for every mile or hour of service operated as fares increase and service deteriorates.

We have been frustrated, especially in the last several years, by what we consider the failure of government and transit-industry management to respond dynamically and effectively to the challenge presented by this problem of declining productivity. For many years, millions of dollars of taxpayers' money have been spent in building freeways and in providing downtown parking facilities, both of which encourage urban sprawl, dispersed trip origins and destinations, and more and more reliance on the automobile in direct competition with our industry. The automobile, in turn, not

only competes with public transportation but causes the traffic jams that stall our public transit vehicles. Meanwhile, federal transit-aid funds have been kept to a small fraction of the federal highway-aid funds, and even those transit funds appropriated have been misused for capital improvements that offer little or no near-term benefit to the riders of bare-bones transit systems.

On a number of public occasions, the Amalgamated Transit Union has gone on record in support of a dramatic restructuring of our industry, based on better service to the public and equitable cost sharing by all those who benefit from transit. We have urged that public transportation be operated on a completely fare-free basis, with the costs prepaid primarily by the local taxpayer. This new form of universal public transportation that is supplied by and for the entire community served by the system at absolutely no user charge to the passenger is, we believe, the single best hope of providing every urban citizen an efficient, convenient, and attractive alternative to the private automobile.

On the other hand, we are firm in our conviction that revitalization of our industry must also include improved service through innovations such as express bus lanes and, perhaps even more important, demand-responsive doorstep service that will make public transportation available to everyone in the entire community served by the transit system.

Thus, the ATU has looked with favor on dial-a-bus as an attractive improvement, offering jobs and economic progress to our membership and increased ridership and productivity to the transit system. For several years in public statements, we have urged that dial-a-bus be given a much higher priority in the federal transit-aid programs, which have focused, we feel, far too much on

capital-intensive remedies, such as highly automated-rail and fixed-guideway systems designed primarily for service to and from the downtown areas. We suggested then that the demand-activated concept of dial-a-bus holds more promise of attaining a total system of reliable low-cost public transportation to the entire community. We feel that the dial-a-bus concept offers to the transit industry a real opportunity to open new markets in the lower density areas and wherever trip origins and destinations are too widely dispersed to permit service by conventional line-haul transit.

Frankly, in the years since 1968 when the new-systems studies of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recommended dial-a-bus for special study and demonstration because of its near-term potential and limited development costs, practically nothing has been accomplished to advance this concept in an operational setting. In June 1970, the Urban Mass Transportation Administration wrote to us stating that dial-a-bus would be given "a proper demonstration" because it was regarded as "one of the few near-term new system solutions for public transportation problems, particularly in lower density residential areas." Unfortunately, UMTA decided to demonstrate this demand-responsive service by using manual dispatch of vehicles, although only a reliable computer-dispatch capability, with its memory bank, could guarantee optimal performance of the dial-a-bus system in terms of speed, reliability, convenience, and cost. In August 1970, we wrote an open letter to the U.S. Department of Transportation inquiring why it should take so long and be so difficult to make use of dial-a-bus techniques, systems, and equipment that had already been developed and laboratory tested and needed only to be demonstrated in a

proper operating project to determine whether they would improve public transit service.

Two years later the first only federal dial-a-ride demonstration project—a manually dispatched service with a fleet of 12 vehicles—finally was launched at Haddonfield, New Jersey. This service is provided by drivers and maintenance personnel belonging to our union and employed by Transport of New Jersey. The demonstration service was held up by an unrelated labor dispute and resumed following a long and difficult strike for a new working agreement. The operating results available to date, which tend to show considerable ridership in the off-peak and weekend hours, must be regarded as preliminary and probably affected at least to some degree by the labor dispute. Under the best of circumstances, as we have pointed out to the department, there can be no possible relevancy of the manual test to the ultimate success or failure of a computer operation.

We predict that if there is no change in the present attitudes of the Congress and the executive branch of the federal government, this still promising new-system concept called dial-a-bus will be sunk without trace, in apparent deference to those who believe in mass expenditures for new capital equipment, automated rapid transit systems, people movers, and the like. The proponents of the so-called "capital-intensive" approach would have us believe that, because as much as 80 percent of all transit operating costs at present are labor costs, the only way to solve the industry's economic problem is to eliminate labor. As recently as April 12, 1972, UMTA stated to the House Appropriations Committee that any additional investigation into dial-a-ride technology in fiscal 1973

...depends on what we learn from Haddonfield and

from approximately 10 other non-federally supported projects similar to Haddonfield that are in operation. If we conclude that dial-a-ride's economic characteristics are such that virtually no communities in the Nation are willing to support it, then there will be no additional technological development. If, however, we conclude that there are a substantial number of communities willing to support dial-a-ride, then we plan to (1) test our first generation computerized control system in Haddonfield, using the existing manual control system as backup; (2) commence extension of the first generation computer system into a second generation system, one that does not rely upon manual control for backup; and (3) search for a new site to conduct a second dial-a-ride demonstration.

It seems to us that UMTA proposes to reject computerized dial-a-bus from any future federal funding on the basis of a manually dispatched operation and, even worse, because the experiment proved "uneconomic" in terms of its inability to support itself from the fare box.

Such outmoded and inequitable concepts of fare-box financing have long proved unworkable as applied to conventional public transit. Secretary of Transportation Volpe, himself, expressly rejected them, stating that the fare box should not be expected to cover all the costs of providing essential transportation services. Why should dial-a-bus be differently treated? To the extent that dial-a-bus simply provides new service in currently unserved areas, replaces fixed-route service, or functions as a collector-feeder system between line-haul services and lower density residential areas, it seems to us no different from traditional forms of public transportation that have, in many cases, received the financial support of the community at large. Of course, to the extent that dial-a-bus is used to provide a true premium or luxury type of service on a convenience basis, the individual user may reasonably be expected to pay his full way without support by public funds.

We have had such limited experience with dial-a-bus in an operational setting that it is difficult as yet to appraise the nature and extent of its impact on collective bargaining in the industry or on the needs and desires of our membership. We believe, however, that demand-responsive services should improve the convenience, reliability, and speed of transit and thus generate a greatly increased patronage base. The increased ridership, inspired by this more responsive service structure, should enable the transit system to function more productively, measured in terms of the number of passengers carried per vehicle-hour and mile operated, and thereby to reduce the overall cost per ride.

Moreover, there is every reason to believe that dial-a-bus transit might, for the first time, enable the industry to tap substantial ridership from the off-peak market, which, typically, has far lower demand densities and dispersed origins and destinations. Conventional line-haul transit serves 5 to 10 times more people during the peak hours than during the average midday period. Penetration of the off-peak market should offer the industry substantial labor and other cost economies and provide increased revenues as well. Dial-a-bus should help stabilize the number of jobs in the industry, reduce the need for split-shift schedules, and otherwise provide a means of achieving higher labor productivity without eliminating jobs.

We fully expect that a public transportation system, using a proper mix of demand-responsive and fixed-route techniques, can succeed in replacing the private automobile as the preferred means of transportation for many urban trips. Such a user- and demand-oriented system, because of its increased patronage and productivity, should be far more economically viable than conventional route-oriented transit. Whether or not it can

fully pay its way, such a system will better serve the community and, in our view is, therefore, more deserving of tax support. In any event, we are convinced that demand-responsive transit will provide the transit worker with better job security and the potential for greater earnings. Demand-responsive transit is, therefore, an attractive opportunity to the worker, can help stem the industry's economic decline, and can, at the same time, provide new job opportunities, better wages, and more adequate pensions, health and welfare, and other benefits and conditions of employment. In other words, we see no reason why demand-responsive techniques should present any special collective bargaining problems for our members or for the industry.

Under no circumstances, however, should the city transit worker who provides dial-a-bus service, as distinguished from regular line-haul service, be asked to accept lower wages or more restrictive working conditions in order that dial-a-bus can be made to pay its way or that lower fares can be charged. We have always taken the position that it is not an answer to the industry's economic problems to reduce wages and labor costs to the lowest possible level consistent with the need for an adequate supply of manpower. The suggestion that demand-responsive services be provided at substandard wages and working conditions, at least until they prove successful, is no less acceptable than any other request that the worker subsidize conventional transit operations whose true costs neither the employer nor the community as a whole is prepared to pay.

As we see it, any special labor implications of demand-responsive service, which may require adjustments in wages, hours, and working conditions, are properly left to the local collective bargaining process. These can and should be

worked out on a consensual basis by the local management and union bargaining committee in terms of the services to be provided and the needs of the parties. At this early point in our experience with dial-a-bus, we would urge that demand-responsive operations be integrated into the regular service with only such minimum revision of normal compensation, seniority, and working conditions as is clearly essential and agreeable to both parties. As in any collective bargaining situation, we would expect management to propose to do this work under terms most favorable to itself, while the worker, as usual, will be more impartial and sacrifice at least some portion of his interests to the greater benefit of the community! Presumably it is on that basis, rather than self-interest, that has led our membership in Haddonfield and Rochester to agree to certain restrictions on their normal picking rights, based on seniority, as they apply to dial-a-bus assignments and the right to bump into and out of this special work.

Perhaps we should close this presentation by stating that transit labor can only be counted on to look with favor on demand-responsive transit as long as the policies and programs for its implementation are sound and as long as adequate levels of employee protection are provided to those who may be adversely affected by such innovation. Under such conditions, the worker's response to the introduction of dial-a-bus systems should, in general, be friendly.

As a final caveat, we might add that in our judgment the transit industry has been very slow to revise its fixed-route structures and to take advantage of demand-responsive concepts. A continuing failure in this regard may well lead to the unnecessary introduction of competitive systems pledged to more dedicated service to the economic and social life of the

community. We feel strongly that this should not happen, and we urge transit management to make a greater commitment to the earliest possible introduction of these demand-responsive services in the interests of better public transportation to the community as a whole.

INFORMAL DISCUSSION

Question: During the course of your formal comments you made a reference to the split shift. Will you elaborate on that? If I understood correctly, you indicated that there might have been a move to eliminate the split shift in working conditions, and it seemed to me that you concurred in that. Is that correct?

Answer: You put the emphasis in the wrong place. We saw that this was an opportunity that would bring about the elimination of the split shift. By using demand-responsive techniques, we could fill in the gap where we now have unproductive and unpaid manpower for periods of 2 to 5 hours in midday. I meant that we could fill in that gap with the demand-responsive needs.

Question: Do you foresee conflicts between labor and management on dial-a-bus?

Answer: I see no conflict. The conflict—if there is one—usually appears because of the demands of management and the demands of the public to get on with the job. The bus driver very much prefers to give courteous, safe, and complete service but finds it difficult in face of constant demands such as "Come on, make this traffic light" or "You're going to be half minute late, and a half minute late means you're going to have 25 percent of the people to carry, and that will delay everybody." It is not that we do not desire to give the service but

the management has not given us the time to give effective service.

Question: A problem that we have encountered during the Haddonfield demonstration is that every time drivers choose their shifts we wind up with many new drivers who require training. Can we not get a permanent set of drivers assigned to the service? What is the position of the Amalgamated Union?

Answer: Well, as long as you envision dial-a-bus as a short-term solution, I think that will continue to be a problem. I think that, if there is any value to dial-a-bus, it is not only that it has the impact of being an immediate, short-term value but that it will be there in the long haul. On that basis then, it serves your purposes as operators of a transit system to train as many people as you possibly can—just as you have done and just as the industry did when it trained streetcar men to be bus drivers or gasoline mechanics to be diesel mechanics or bus drivers to be charter or sightseeing guides. We do this because we want as many people in the labor pool as possible. The lesson that you should not rely on too few people to staff an operation has been demonstrated during this conference. Two people are now absent because they were the key people in their local situations. You do not want to have to depend on a small group of people in your dial-a-bus system.

Question: But has anything been resolved on this issue at the national level?

Answer: I tried to maybe go around the back door to tell you that this probably is not so big a problem as you think. But if you think it is, then it has to be resolved at the local bargaining table. This union is formed of fairly autonomous local unions. We give leadership, but not direction.