

TransitTopics: Boston's Neighborhood Transit Service Workshop Program

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Transit providers need to hear directly from their users how everyday transit service can better address their needs. TransitTopics is a program undertaken over the past 3 years by the City of Boston's Transportation Department. The department sponsors neighborhood workshops to enable residents to discuss transit service issues. Comments and recommendations made by workshop participants are consolidated in a report and distributed to the public and Boston's regional transit agency, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). The workshops have served as a forum for residents to discuss their concerns, and this has provided insight into transit service problems, along with recommendations for areawide and neighborhood-specific improvements. Suggestions have included bus route alterations to serve identified needs and new bus shelter locations. Key findings are that citizens very much appreciate speaking directly with public officials and will respond constructively in a structured setting. In addition, beyond giving credit for positive service changes, they offer a wealth of observations and opinions about transit and workable solutions to address specific problems. The program has also provided a strengthened working relationship between the city and the MBTA.

The Boston Transportation Department (BTD) developed the TransitTopics program in 1988 to give neighborhood residents a greater voice in transit planning decisions. The highlight of the program is a series of workshops held in city neighborhoods each year to discuss local transit service issues, such as frequency and hours of service or route structure. Workshop comments and recommendations are consolidated in a report distributed to the public and the regional transit agency.

The program was designed to complement ongoing efforts by the city and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), the regional transit agency that serves Boston and the surrounding metropolitan area, to discuss transportation needs and projects. Although opportunities exist for community participation on major capital projects, there is often little occasion for transit riders to relate their concerns about everyday service. TransitTopics bridges this gap by creating a forum for transit users to communicate directly with public officials.

The city, which has conducted the program since 1988, considers TransitTopics an important part of its transportation planning and advocacy role. The program has become a critical input to the city's annual recommendations to the MBTA, and the transit agency has been a positive and active participant in the program since its inception.

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BACKGROUND

Role of Transit in Boston

Public transportation plays a crucial role in supporting the social and economic vitality of Boston's neighborhoods, its commercial and industrial centers, and its downtown. In addition to being an essential part of the city's infrastructure, transit also serves the surrounding greater Boston communities. It provides commuters from outlying cities and towns with an alternative to automobile travel, removes a significant amount of traffic from city streets, and reduces the demand for a limited parking supply.

Many city residents rely on transit for work, school, shopping, and recreation trips. One out of three Boston residents depends on transit to get to work. About 70 percent of city residents work within the city boundaries; about 45 percent work in their own neighborhoods or downtown. Transit provides important connections for these residents to the economic opportunities provided in the downtown and with the thriving commercial districts in their own neighborhoods. This access is especially important for the 39 percent of Boston residents who do not own a car.

The MBTA provides an array of transit services throughout the Boston metropolitan area. It operates rapid transit and light-rail services (known as the Red, Orange, Blue, and Green Lines), as well as an extensive network of bus routes. In addition, it operates commuter rail lines, express buses, and commuter boats, which principally serve suburban residents who work in the Boston core; and it provides specialized door-to-door transit services for the handicapped. In recent years, the MBTA has made a number of significant improvements to this transportation network, such as new and extended fixed-rail lines, major equipment purchases, and track and signal improvements.

In order to help support the costs of providing public transit services, the City of Boston pays close to \$50 million each year to support MBTA operations. This represents 42 percent of the total contributed by municipalities in the region; it is also a significant portion of the city's budget. Given the size and importance of this investment in the city and region, the city believes it is crucial that residents and other users receive high-quality transit services that meet their needs.

City Transit Policy

As part of its overall planning efforts, BTD has developed a number of programs and policies designed to encourage increased use of public transportation.

Although the city does not provide transit service directly, city officials work closely with the MBTA to ensure the best possible transit service for Boston and its residents. As a member of the advisory board to the MBTA, the city plays a key role in reviewing the MBTA's annual operating budget. (Representatives of the 78 cities and towns served by the MBTA sit on the advisory board.)

In addition, city officials participate in numerous MBTA long-range planning efforts for major construction projects. In many cases, city representatives serve on project advisory committees or present testimony at public hearings. At other times, the MBTA asks the city to review project plans.

In contrast, there have been few comparable opportunities for city officials to have a voice in identifying transit service problems. Because its role has been generally limited to reviewing MBTA proposals, the city rarely has had an opportunity to initiate planning for new transit services. In the past, constituent complaints about MBTA service were usually forwarded to the appropriate MBTA officials. The city had no other formalized way to address these concerns.

Although similar opportunities exist for residents to participate in longer-term transit planning efforts (again, particularly related to larger capital projects), city residents also have few occasions to identify everyday transit service problems and needs.

Yet, it is these day-to-day aspects of transit service that touch the lives of Boston residents most directly. The reliability of bus services, the cleanliness of stations, the helpfulness of drivers in giving information to riders, and other service aspects are the most immediate and abiding contacts between the transit system and its users.

The TransitTopics program provides an avenue for users to comment on how the system meets their needs. TransitTopics serves two major goals:

- It provides a voice for the neighborhoods in articulating transit service needs and opportunities for improvement, and
- It helps the city formulate an agenda and establish priorities for transit service improvements to pursue them with MBTA.

The TransitTopics program gives neighborhood residents and business representatives an opportunity to receive information about the transit services in their neighborhood and, more important, to articulate their perceptions of the transit service problems and needs of their areas. Through this process, the program can identify the priority issues and needs within the local neighborhoods along with systemwide issues.

IMPLEMENTING THE PROGRAM

Program Development

In 1988, BTD initiated the pilot program for TransitTopics. In April of that year, the city invited community leaders to a reception to introduce the program and to garner their support for the upcoming workshops in their neighborhoods. Mayor Raymond L. Flynn was the keynote speaker at the event, voicing his commitment and enthusiasm for the program.

For the pilot program, workshops were held in a representative group of neighborhoods. Some areas had a high proportion of transit-dependent residents (on the basis of automobile ownership, income levels, etc.). Others were generally well served by the MBTA, but a few improvements were in order. Still others were facing potentially disruptive highway construction projects, and mitigating transit programs were being planned. Nine workshops were scheduled in the summer of 1988. By combining two sets of neighborhoods with similar transit service and demographic characteristics, 12 of the city's 16 neighborhoods were covered in the first year of the program.

Before the program's second year, BTD staff developed a long-range plan to ensure that neighborhoods were covered regularly and that city council districts were covered equitably. On the basis of this plan, a more focused second-year effort was undertaken, and workshops were held in four neighborhoods. In 1990, during the program's third year, BTD met with residents in six neighborhoods.

Meeting Notification

After the meetings were scheduled, BTD began the public notification process. Letters of invitation were sent to community residents, neighborhood organizations, and elected officials. In addition, meeting notices were posted at local community facilities and public buildings, and press releases were sent to local and citywide media.

Workshop Format

Meetings were kept as informal as possible. They opened with welcomes by city officials and acknowledgment of the presence of any elected officials and MBTA representatives. After a brief presentation about neighborhood demographics and transit services, the workshop facilitator discussed the ground rules. Agreed-on ground rules included the following:

- Concerns should relate to transit service issues rather than major capital projects or minor maintenance complaints,
- Everyone would have an equal opportunity to speak,
- No one would be permitted to dominate the discussion,
- All points of view would be welcomed,
- Speakers should stick to the point, and
- All would keep their comments as short as possible.

Here the facilitator pointed out that silent people would be drawn out, and difficult or hostile behavior was discouraged. She said that the focus was to turn complaints into suggestions and priorities, and she urged people to be realistic and constructive about their expectations (e.g., they were to avoid impractical proposals of monorails or new routes in areas where there was limited ridership).

After handing out index cards and requesting participants to write down what they considered their three most important transit service issues, the facilitator opened the discussion. Then, as the facilitator went around the table or room, each person was asked to present the first concern on his or her list, to be recorded on flip charts. The aim was to conduct a

1-min description of a particular issue, with the facilitator stepping in to move the discussion along when participants got bogged down in too much detail or disagreement.

The facilitator repeated the procedure, asking individuals for their second and then third points on their index cards, discussing specifics briefly with the group, and then proceeding to the next person. By moving on in this way, the facilitator could avoid having only a small number of people monopolize the discussion or cut short unnecessarily long discourses.

Frequently, participants would highlight the same issue. These concerns were designated on the flip charts with stars, especially if others voiced their agreement. Both sides were recorded if opposing viewpoints were expressed. For example, in one neighborhood, a few people were interested in changing the terminus of a bus route, whereas others felt that the existing route served the neighborhood well. Both comments were recorded initially, but ultimately the entire group did not agree on this as a priority.

The flip charts were used to record every comment, which helped organize the discussion and focus it on the major topics of concern to residents. In one meeting, where there was a large number of attendees, participants were divided into two discussion groups to give everyone ample opportunity to speak.

After about an hour, residents were asked to review their comments and set priorities. In early meetings, residents often insisted that every suggestion was a priority and that they simply could not choose among them. In order to focus the decision-making process in subsequent meetings, participants received three colored press-on dots. They were asked to place the dots, individually or in combination, next to the issues they considered to be their priorities.

Finally, the facilitator summarized the newly established priorities, thanked residents for their participation, and described the next steps in the process. These include BTB's consolidating the recommendations from the different neighborhoods into a summary report of each year's program findings, and submitting these service recommendations to the MBTA for review and response.

Role of the Facilitator

The facilitator plays a key role in the workshops. The meetings specifically do not encompass a long detailed technical presentation, and they are designed to avoid direct question-and-answer sessions between the city, MBTA, and residents. The focus is on what residents and users have to say and how they feel the system can better suit their needs.

The facilitator also works carefully at steering the conversation away from putting MBTA observers on the spot and away from topics that are not appropriate for the workshop. Typically, these are areas that are not related directly to daily service issues.

Some issues may be too large. For example, adding new fixed-rail lines or stations is not an appropriate area of discussion for TransitTopics workshops because the feasibility studies or environmental impact statements for large capital projects have their own public involvement process.

Conversely, some concerns are too small (such as a single broken bus heater or vandalized bus stop sign). For the latter category, individual complaints are recorded on index cards

and forwarded to the appropriate MBTA department. In addition, for workshops where there were a number of such complaints, systemwide maintenance is listed as a separate issue in the meeting summaries.

Workshop Materials

Workshop participants receive a TransitPak consisting of the following materials: (a) a 15-page summary of neighborhood demographic characteristics and transit services prepared by BTB for each meeting; (b) a neighborhood map showing current transit routes and stations, again prepared by BTB; and (c) an assortment of MBTA informational materials.

Demographic information is drawn from the U.S. Census, updated when necessary, on the basis of city data. This information includes the total residential population of a neighborhood and its proportion of the city's population. Because people of different age groups have different transportation needs, population is also subdivided by age: school-age children (under 18 years), adults (18 to 64 years), and elderly (65 years and over).

Data are also included on automobile ownership to indicate dependence on transit. In order to further illustrate the relationship between work trips and transit, information is presented on how employees travel to their jobs and the general location of those jobs.

Information about transit ridership is also included. Boarding counts for buses and rapid transit services are drawn from statistics compiled by the MBTA. Ridership at neighborhood transit stations and on local bus lines is compared to other services throughout the city. Information about fares and special services is also included. MBTA schedule cards for buses in each community are reproduced for the packets. Finally, each packet includes a listing of useful addresses and telephone numbers for the City of Boston and the MBTA, such as the MBTA's service information representatives, its complaint or commendation number, and the city's neighborhood coordinators.

Bus routes and transit lines are illustrated on a separate map included in the packets. A larger version of the map is also prepared for the group discussion. MBTA materials distributed in the TransitPaks include full- and pocket-sized system maps and information on special needs services, commuter rail operations, fares, and the prepaid monthly pass program.

Program Transition

The city initially contracted with a consulting firm to help develop the program. The goal was for BTB to design a pilot program with technical assistance from consultants and then carry it forward, with BTB staff undertaking all the elements on a continuing basis.

The consulting firm worked with city staff to develop the pilot program: formulating a strategy, running the meetings, designing materials (primarily handouts and maps), coordinating logistics and format, and preparing the final report.

Pleased with the response to the first year's workshops, BTB officials incorporated the program into ongoing in-house

planning efforts. Since the first year, BTD staff members have been successfully running the meetings and managing the program. In order to prepare staff to do so, the department contracted with the original consulting firm to run a 2-day training session covering meeting facilitation and oral presentation skills.

PROGRAM RESULTS

Program Findings

The workshops have provided many insights into transit service problems, along with recommendations for area-wide and neighborhood-specific service improvements. It was clear from the start that transit is a topic of great interest and importance to city dwellers and workers. Almost all participants have a wealth of observations and opinions about transit, and some have formulated solutions to address specific problems.

Some underlying themes quickly emerged, and they have remained consistent over the 3 years of the program.

- Citizens much appreciate the opportunity to communicate their observations, concerns, and recommendations about transit service to those responsible for bringing about improvements.

- Riders often see the MBTA personnel that they encounter daily as individuals. However, there is often confusion about the system and the different jurisdictional responsibilities among agencies. Ultimately, residents are not sensitive to the bureaucratic process; they simply want to see their problems addressed.

- Many citizens acknowledge the improvements that have been made in recent years in transit facilities and services, but they expect more to be done and more quickly. People are particularly puzzled and frustrated that apparently simple solutions to small problems can go unimplemented for years; and they are confounded by long delays in decisions and implementation of key transit service improvements.

The encouraging aspect of these themes is that even small actions that yield service improvements are likely to be recognized and appreciated by riders. In turn, there is hope that better service will foster more positive attitudes toward the MBTA. In fact, initial concerns on the part of both the city and the Authority that workshops might serve as forums for riders' frustrations, without generating constructive suggestions, were not realized.

TransitTopics in Action: Two Examples

When developing the TransitTopics program, most of the workshops were expected to focus on specific local issues. Plenty of these did come up in the discussions such as crowding on a particular bus route, lack of coordination between bus and commuter rail schedules, and the need for a passenger shelter at a busy bus stop.

But it was quickly discovered that residents saw the program as an opportunity to tackle issues that crossed neighborhood lines as well such as the need for better maintenance and

security at fixed-rail stations, a desire for improved access to service information, and the wish for more outreach and accountability on the part of the MBTA.

Highlighted in the following paragraphs are two specific concerns raised at TransitTopics meetings and the MBTA response to each. One concern focuses on a neighborhood bus route, and the other identifies a systemwide problem.

Example: Mattapan Bus Service

The first TransitTopics workshop was held in June 1988 in Boston's Mattapan neighborhood. At the time, eight bus routes ran through the area. Most served Mattapan Square, the major commercial district, and provided connections to either the Red or Orange rapid-transit lines.

Connections to the Red Line were quite direct, with an estimated one-way bus trip at 11 to 12 min. Passengers transferring to the Orange Line were not so fortunate. Although the line's southern terminus, Forest Hills, is only 10 to 15 min from Mattapan Square, local bus routes connected with two stations farther north. Schedule cards estimated bus travel time on these congested routes to be 23 to 41 min.

Residents asked the MBTA to provide a direct bus connection between Mattapan Square and Forest Hills. They asked the MBTA to pay particular attention to early-morning connections between bus and subway, noting that many neighborhood residents use the Orange Line to reach their jobs in downtown hotels and restaurants. Quite a few of them must be on the job by 6:00 a.m., but existing connections to the Orange Line could not guarantee this access.

In response to these requests, the MBTA examined bus service in the Mattapan corridor. After reviewing ridership patterns, the MBTA determined that a new bus serving Forest Hills, in conjunction with reconfiguration of existing routes, could improve connections to the Orange Line without requiring additional resources.

The MBTA proposed a new bus route between Mattapan and Forest Hills with a trip time of 10 to 19 min, depending on traffic. The schedule ensures that passengers can easily connect with the first few Orange Line runs of the day, both before 5:30 a.m., enabling them to reach downtown by 6:00 a.m.

The MBTA first announced these proposed changes in September 1989 at a public meeting cosponsored with BTD, where residents were asked to comment on the proposal. Other MBTA hearings followed, and the changes took effect in December of that year. Public response has been mixed. Although passengers appreciate the new service to Forest Hills, those depending on other bus routes in the corridor feel that their service has been cut back too severely. As part of its ongoing review process, the MBTA will continue to look at service in this area and make refinements if warranted.

Example: The Bus Stops Here

Poor information and communication were among the most frequently and strongly voiced criticisms of transit service at most of the workshops. Patrons were especially critical of the lack of service information and asked the MBTA to make

maps and schedules more widely available. In particular, signs at all bus stops, with information about routes and schedules, were recommended.

Admittedly, the plea for better informational signage did not originate with the TransitTopics program. This issue has been of long-standing concern, and transit advocates throughout the region have been seeking improvements for some time.

A local transportation management organization recently produced maps and schedules for area bus services, posting them at MBTA bus stops. Subsequently, a newspaper editorial praised these efforts and called on the MBTA to do the same throughout the region. Through the TransitTopics program, the city added its voice to those requesting that this issue be addressed.

The MBTA introduced its pilot bus stop signage program in spring 1990. During the first phase of the program, implemented during National Transportation Week, new signs with schedule and route information were placed along six bus routes. Informal feedback from the pilot effort has been positive. The MBTA currently has plans to evaluate the program's effectiveness; program expansion is pending a favorable review.

PRACTICAL LESSONS

Much has been learned from running TransitTopics meetings over the last 3 years—about meeting logistics, publicity, and atmosphere. Although TransitTopics was the forum, the lessons can be transferred to virtually any public meeting.

- You can never publicize a meeting too much. No matter how extensive you know your publicity has been, someone will criticize you for not giving adequate notice.
- Try to reach people where they live. Not everyone is on an official mailing list, and not everyone reads the local newspaper. This year, for the first time, notices were sent to community organizations for inclusion in their monthly calendars. Next year, an attempt will be made to take the advice of this year's meeting participants and work through local churches to publicize meetings.
- Make sure people can get to the meeting. Not only is it essential to ensure that the meeting place is accessible to those with mobility impairments, but it is important to think about the time of day. Many elderly citizens are reluctant to attend meetings outside their homes at night. If you want to hear from seniors, schedule a meeting during the day or hold the meeting at a regularly attended location.
- Consider cosponsoring the meeting with local civic groups. This gives the program an implied endorsement—and additional publicity.
- Confirm the meeting room on the day before. It sounds obvious, but it is also easy to overlook until you encounter a locked door on a sweltering June evening. Once, the mistake was made of asking someone else to confirm the reservation—and disaster was narrowly averted.
- The optimum meeting size is 15 to 20 people. This allows free participation and generates a wide range of ideas and issues. If the session is too much smaller, issues may not be representative; larger, and the group becomes unwieldy.

- A trained facilitator is essential to the success of the meeting. He or she will keep the meeting focused on producing positive and constructive suggestions, draw out reluctant participants, prevent others from dominating the discussion, and generally keep things moving.

- A defined meeting structure can help avoid a disorganized and chaotic complaint session. A set agenda, including a specific timetable for each segment, will give the facilitator the tools to run the meeting effectively. Dry runs are particularly helpful.

- Always follow up on questions. Nothing reinforces people's frustrations with government agencies faster than failure to follow up on a request or a question. Sadly, many people have become cynical about government officials. Following up on requests or questions belies those suspicions. Additionally, people are appreciative (and usually surprised) with a phone call the next day to answer a question or provide some information.

- Keep the meetings open, informal, and honest. A sense of humor helps keep things in perspective, and informal refreshments can help set a positive tone.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The TransitTopics program has successfully brought together representatives from the city, the MBTA, and the community in an open planning process. But, as with any new program, there is still room for improvement. Discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs is experience with public participation.

Neighborhood Participation

Over the last 3 years, attendance at TransitTopics meetings has ranged from a low of 3 to a high of 35. Although the numbers of workshop participants were small relative to the resident population and the transit-riding public as a whole, their comments represent the views of citizens who are intensely concerned about transit service improvements for themselves and their communities.

In general, participation has been dominated by a few familiar faces—people who are active in several organizations and attend most community meetings. Frequently, these participants conveyed the views of local civic groups and neighborhood associations. In this respect, those who participated can be viewed as reflecting the weight and depth of citizen concerns and offering guidance to city policy makers. But the intended strategy of attracting transit users who may not participate regularly in other civic activities has not been entirely successful.

Drawbacks to good attendance can include a range of reasons unrelated to program design. Some residents may have no specific concerns about transit service overall; in fact, recent MBTA ridership surveys indicate a high level of customer satisfaction. Other residents may feel powerless about effecting changes. Additionally, some people may have trouble attending night meetings, especially working parents and others who have little time to devote to civic activities.

The city will continue to investigate ways of increasing attendance, including obtaining feedback directly from residents about workable techniques. As the program evolves, the city continues to expand its efforts to publicize the meetings and to attract a wide cross-section of participants.

The initial approach was typical of most city meetings. Notices were sent out to community leaders and elected officials, press releases were placed in local and city-wide newspapers, and notices were sent to the city's public-access cable news program. When possible, fliers were distributed at other neighborhood meetings. Notices were passed out experimentally at neighborhood subway stations but this approach was quickly deemed unsuccessful. (In fact, the meeting for which this technique was used was one of the most poorly attended.)

It was discovered quite early that a major promotional campaign is necessary; there can never be too much publicity. Using a range of techniques is important. Using both standard methods, such as news releases, as well as less traditional ones (e.g., an insert in a local group's mailing) is critical. Even so, there is always some criticism that individuals did not receive enough notice or only heard about the meeting from a neighbor.

Techniques to increase participation currently under consideration include personal phone calls to neighborhood leaders a few days before the workshops. These will have a double purpose: first, to remind people about the meetings and encourage their attendance, and second, to solicit their assistance in recruiting their neighbors and associates for the meeting. Also, telephone calls to local newspapers and other media should also be placed well in advance of the workshops to make sure these outlets are publicizing the workshops.

These efforts should serve to increase attendance substantially. Experience derived from other public participation programs held in the city and the region indicates that a series of personal telephone calls is an effective means of boosting attendance at public meetings.

But, ultimately, the most effective means of increasing participation will be demonstrating the program's success regarding identifiable transit service improvements in response to workshop requests.

In-House Program Management

The transition from consultant to in-house program management has proven extremely successful. Initially, the consulting firm worked with city staff to develop a framework for the program, prepare meeting materials, and produce the final

report. City officials opened and closed each public meeting, and the consultants served as facilitators.

To ensure a smooth transition to the program's second year, the city contracted with the same consulting firm to train staff in meeting facilitation skills. BTD staff built upon the first-year framework to produce the second-year program, adding a few refinements and innovations along the way.

The city saves substantial out-of-pocket expenses, and use of staff time has not increased significantly. In the program's first year, staff spent considerable time in meeting with consultants and reviewing materials. Because major decisions about the program format had been worked out in the first year, city staff members were able to devote about the same amount of time in subsequent years to running the program directly.

CONCLUSIONS

TransitTopics has increased public awareness of the city's role in advocating transit improvements. The program has enabled the city to formalize its transit planning efforts in a highly visible forum. Because the TransitTopics program is designed to bridge the gap between the transit-riding public and the MBTA, it complements MBTA planning efforts by creating an ongoing forum for discussing transit operations in Boston.

The tangible results of the program are but one measure of its success. The new bus routes, shelters, and signs are visible reminders of the importance of incorporating public participation into the planning process. Equally important, the program has strengthened the working relationship between the city and the MBTA. By encouraging the MBTA to respond more directly to the concerns of its riders, the program has opened additional lines of communication between the city, the MBTA, and the riding public. MBTA representatives have attended every neighborhood workshop over the past 3 years, and they have expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to listen to citizen comments and concerns in a constructive setting.

Indeed, TransitTopics has helped encourage the MBTA to seek advice directly from its patrons. Not only has the MBTA begun to list participation in TransitTopics as evidence of its own efforts to solicit public input, but the transit authority has recently developed a similar program of its own. In November 1990, the MBTA sponsored a TransitTopics meeting in the city of Somerville. No better evidence of the impact of the TransitTopics program exists.

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