

LEGISLATED CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE, A CASE HISTORY: SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY, by Robert T. Wooten, Assistant General manager, Public Affairs and Management Services, SEPTA

In July, 1979, the House of Representatives of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania created a Select Committee to Investigate the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). Between September and December of that year, the Committee conducted fourteen public hearings, as well as a thorough and comprehensive study of the transit authority that provides mass transit service to Philadelphia and its four adjacent suburban counties. On January 22, 1980, the Committee issued its report, including recommendations about how to improve the quality of transit service in the Southeastern Region. Among those were:

"The Committee recommends that a Citizen Advisory Committee be statutorily required to be established by the Board. This Citizen Advisory Committee would be empowered to review and comment on matters including, but not limited to, a Comprehensive Transit Plan, the operating budget, the capital budget, and any changes in level of services or fares prior to Board action."

That particular recommendation among many others was adopted by the General Assembly in July, 1980 through passage of Act 101, a Comprehensive Amendment to the Pennsylvania Urban Mass Transportation Assistance Law of 1967, the enabling legislation of SEPTA.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the Citizen Advisory Committee to SEPTA within the context of its legislatively-mandated origins and to explain its subsequent development.

By the spring of 1981, the Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) had been organized and began to function. Membership was appointed from two sources reflecting two classes of membership: 1) Twenty-four members served as appointees of their respective government jurisdictions. That is, members served as appointees of their County Commissioners or the Mayor of Philadelphia with the number of appointees from each jurisdiction being a function of the proportion of total system riders residing within each. Not surprisingly, most of this class of members were residents of the City of Philadelphia, 2) Five members were appointees of the Chief operations Officer/General Manager of SETPA, with each residing within the five respective local jurisdictions.

In characterizing the membership as originally appointed and, I believe, through the life of the organization to date, the terms "broad-based" and "cross-section" remain accurate. Community activists, lawyers, university professors, college students, housewives, center city businessmen, and merchants and retirees, were all represented. A racial, ethnic and residential cross-section of South-eastern Pennsylvania's socio-economic demographic character also appeared to have been attained and maintained.

To understand the relationship which has developed between the CAC and the Authority, it is necessary to describe the circumstances by which the Committee was formed.

As may be imagined, state legislative bodies do not create select investigative committees to study organizations which are perceived as healthy and functioning efficiently. SEPTA's situation in 1979 was desperate and the action taken by the General Assembly was a response to the common public belief that public transportation in the Philadelphia region was a disaster.

Indeed it was. SEPTA's service quality had deteriorated through the late 1970's. The Broad Street Subway, one of the major trunk lines had by August, 1979 reached a point where only twenty-eight cars were available to meet a line requirement of ninety. The mean distance between failure on that part of the system plummeted to 4,000 miles. The bus fleet was in similar straights and a broken down bus pulled over within the Central Business District had become a common sight. Organized commuter groups were suing the Authority for failure to fulfill its primary function. One story, which may be apocryphal, does capture the condition of transit service. Buses on one notorious line which ran from the Central Business District into the Northwest section of the City had to meet the challenge of what by Philadelphia standards was a steep hill. By 1979, passengers on that run had resorted to either getting off the bus at the bottom of said incline and walking to the top in hopes that their unloaded vehicle would meet them, or reverting to the lessons of childhood literature by shouting in unison, "I think I can, I think I can..." as they started the climb!

In addition to the decline in service reliability, SEPTA's Board was fraught with political squabbling and bickering. SEPTA Board meetings tended to be exercises in vitriolic and parochial grandstanding. Even more damaging to the Authority as a result of the Board's internal acrimony was the failure of the Board to agree and act upon even the most rudimentary issue. Hiring resolutions became matters of debate and inaction. Professional transit people shied away from SEPTA jobs to avoid the circus atmosphere which frequently surrounded resolutions endorsing their employment. Capital budget projects could not be implemented because the Board could not or would not resolve to hire design engineers or contractors. As example, in spite of the availability of considerably more funds, SEPTA could only spend \$17M on Capital projects in 1979, primarily because its Board could not agree on the mechanisms by which to expend these funds!

Under those circumstances, the SEPTA staff in 1980 was demoralized, beaten, and one may suggest, ashamed of the service out-on-the-street. Riders, concurrently, were embittered, angry, vocal and equally frustrated by the service to which they were subjected.

Consequently, as SEPTA staff and the CAC confronted each other for the first time and at the behest of a statutory mandate it is not unfair to characterize the attitude of the CAC toward the staff as their being, at

best, nameless, faceless bureaucrats non-responsive to the ridership; or at worst, as a bunch of arrogant incompetents, consciously milking the public. Such a perception was exacerbated by the practice at SETPA that only the Chairman of the Board could be quoted in the press or act as a spokesman for the Authority.

The staff had had good reason to assume a bunker mentality, to the point that they considered the CAC to be either a collection of non-professional transit aficionados ignorant of the requirements to operate quality transit service; or a group of mean-spirited egomaniacs seeking gratification by beating up on a bunch of already-battered transit professionals. In either event, the staff viewed the CAC as another in a long list of politically-created encumbrances to efficient transit.

In order to understand what developed subsequent to the formation of the CAC, it is significant to note that Act 101, the Statute which created that group, also restructured SEPTA's governance by granting considerably more power to the General Manager. That fact, as well as the election of a new chairman, lent itself to: 1) a much more open public posture on the part of the SEPTA Staff, and 2) a significant reduction of infighting on the part of the Board and, conversely, the establishment of a clearly defined agreement on the part of the Board that partisan politics would take a back seat to the needs of public transit.

Although it did not occur immediately, the relationship between SEPTA staff and the CAC developed positively. The agendas of the CAC monthly meetings typically included a dialogue between the Committee and a SEPTA staff person who was responsible for the particular topic. Even if such a dialogue did not always achieve unanimity on specific topics, the succession of meetings combined: 1) to chip away at the perception of SEPTA staff as nameless and faceless, 2) to establish an exchange of views in a rationale non-emotional atmosphere, 3) to expose the Committee to the difficult hard decisions about priorities and allocation of limited resources in solving problems and, 4) to help create among the staff the perception that CAC members were sincere and dedicated in their desire to see transit improvements. Over the years these exchanges promoted the development of relationships between staff and CAC membership, helped to educate the CAC about the complexity of transit issues and, because of the diversity of topics, forced the Committee to focus on the major issues and adhere to its mandate as advisor to the General Manager. Although the CAC experienced difficulty in making choices, it was compelled to do so in order to maintain the momentum and viability of the organization. In essence, the process that evolved mirrored the decision process staff confronted in facing the dilemmas of managing transit.

Over the four years of its active existence, the CAC has developed into a mature, well-functioning and integral component of public transit in Southeastern Pennsylvania. This is not to claim perfection -- problems exist and future challenges loom. For instance, the Committee frequently complains that some issues and actions are not provided to them by staff

in a timely manner, and that on some issues, they are ignored. Additionally, as with most committees, the bulk of work is accomplished by the more active minority and a serious problem exists in filling vacancies.

More importantly, since 1979, SEPTA has made tremendous gains in service quality. The depths of 1979 have been surpassed and the Authority has achieved a plateau. That achievement in itself is a challenge. To continue to progress will be more difficult. The crisis mentality which forced people to act rather than debate has dissipated. The tendency to wrangle over decisions is greater and the danger that such arguments will not only impede momentum but could begin to unravel the accomplishments of the past is very real.

CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEES: AUSTIN, TEXAS EXPERIENCE, by Alan Wulkan, Executive Director, Capital Metro Transportation Authority, and Julie Hoover, Vice President and Director, Parsons Brinckerhoff, Inc.

Since 1970, the Austin area has experienced substantial population growth and the 600,000 people now living in the region place enormous demands on its transportation facilities. Today Austin is the fastest growing city in Texas and perhaps the country. However, unlike other larger Texas cities such as Houston and Dallas, Austin has the fewest lane miles of freeway per capita in the state. This has led to congestion and service deficiencies which, without corrective measures, will become more serious as the region continues to grow at a phenomenal rate.

With the passage of statewide legislation in 1981 allowing cities the size of Austin to establish metropolitan transit authorities (MTAs), local officials accelerated their efforts to develop increased and better public transit service. In 1982 the City of Austin, Travis County, and the City of Round Rock combined efforts to organize a citizen's task force to study the feasibility of establishing an MTA in the Austin area. Such action proved highly desirable and in October 1983, the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Capital Metro) was created. The five-member interim board then quickly established an ambitious schedule to develop a transit service plan, set a rate of sales tax, and conduct a confirmation election. On January 19, the voters of the Austin region overwhelmingly approved Capital metro with 59% of the vote. In great part this success can be attributed to time dedicated to the citizen involvement effort.

From its creation, the Capital Metro Board believed that public acceptability of their transit service plan was essential for the successful passage of the referendum. Thus, they requested that an extensive public involvement program be undertaken throughout the duration of the transit planning process.