

**ADDRESSING OUR CHALLENGES:
SOLUTIONS "OUTSIDE THE BOX"**

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The goal of this session is to look at some examples of specific solutions. We start with a summary of experiences in changing the service provision structure. The presentation covers some of the initial findings of the TCRP project B-6, "Improving Transit Connections by Enhanced Suburban Mobility." Through a comprehensive mail and phone survey, the researchers have compiled the experiences of a vast number of innovative suburban services, and have been able to identify characteristics that are common to successful efforts.

Three other presentations highlight service aspects of planning and operation, funding strategies, and the opportunities for the application of technology. The first illustrates experiences of Montgomery County, Maryland, in the provision of transit services. The Montgomery County Division of Transit Services' main focus is providing mobility to the people within the region. When transit providers begin to think in terms of providing mobility, not just providing service, non-traditional service ideas become possible and often open up partnerships that may bring new funding to the table. The second presentation covers such innovative funding options, highlighting the Los Angeles area's experiences.

The final presentation in this session focuses on technology applications. The main message is that technology for technology's sake is not useful. On the other hand, technology used to significantly change the functioning of an area or to provide information that will affect the outcomes is an appropriate way to do things. The key is to use technology as a tool to support improved and innovative practices that either lead to efficiencies in the provision of service or open new opportunities to address mobility needs through non-traditional services.

**EXPERIENCES IN CHANGING THE SERVICE
PROVISION STRUCTURE**

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This presentation draws from the TCRP B-6 project, "Improving Transit Connections by Enhanced Suburban Mobility." The project began December 1994 and is scheduled to end in early 1996. The primary project objective is to develop a guidebook that shares the experiences of others in serving the suburban travel market. It will identify and provide insight into actions that have been successful. The guidebook will be structured to assist others in following and understanding the successful examples so they can enhance suburban mobility in their own communities and service areas.

Project Methodology

The project looks at four areas and focuses on details of service delivery and types of services:

- Traditional Services
- Non-Traditional Services
- Fare Policy Coordination
- Land Use and Regulation

The emphasis is on the first two elements, as there are other TCRP projects examining the latter two in greater detail. Of course, issues of fares and land use are important to understanding the conditions under which services function.

The survey of current practices has sought answers to a number of questions including:

- What is the range of services being provided in the suburbs?
- How are transit operators meeting the challenges of suburban mobility?
- How is demand response service being used?
- What types of suburban areas are services being provided in?

The project researchers sought to identify linkages between the types of services and the location that they are operating in and identify what creates success and what creates failure. Among the issues being explored are how the services got started and

how are the projects being evaluated for success and continuation.

The survey was conducted by phone to enable a full and complete discussion of all elements of a project. Over 60 in-depth discussions were conducted.

Preliminary Findings

The survey has led to the following seven planning steps:

1. *Clearly identify the problem or need that you are trying to address.* If you do not have an identified problem or market opportunity, and just have a solution, success will elude you. A realistic chance for market share must exist at the outset. The successful operator is the one who thinks in terms of mobility and does not just think transit. Often a problem or need is something that someone else in the community identifies. Successful transit operators capitalize on these types of opportunities. The opportunities arise through talking to the community at large and doing considerable research. They are operating based on feedback that a service is needed.

2. *Evaluate local conditions carefully.* Go out and learn about your suburb. In what kind of environment are you thinking about providing service, or where is there a problem?

The urban hierarchy goes from residential to commercial, and in the middle we have a balance. Residential suburbs, whether low density or more densely developed with mixed housing, are generally feeder communities. There is a larger work force in the community than there are jobs, and they are feeding out. The balanced mixed-use suburb really is a two-way community with residents and jobs. In some sense it is a small edge city.

There are two types of edge city to consider. Irvine, Metro Park, and Texas Medical Center are considered the classic new edge cities, where suddenly office development comes into an area because of the confluence of roadways, the need for more space for businesses to move out of center city, etc. And then you have cities that have reinvented themselves — Rockville, Maryland; Stamford, Connecticut; White Plains, New York — older urban areas that are now within greater metropolitan areas. They possess rebuilt downtowns or rapidly developing fringes, the same

kind of buildings on pads, large scale parking, etc. that are in the new edge cities.

And finally, there are three cases of pure commercial, non-residential suburban development — suburban corridors, suburban campuses, and exurban corporate enclaves. These include: Bishop Ranch in the San Francisco Bay area; Hoffman Estates, in the Chicago area; and Plano, Texas.

These areas are defined, for our purposes, to see how transit operates in each environment. For the work trip, services succeed when there is at least a set of concentrated trip ends. Long work trips work very well for most applications. Short work trips do not. This is because transit can almost never compete with the auto over a short trip.

Short nonwork trips and midday trips appear to be more conducive to success in suburban areas. Services that are effective are community circulators, serving community-based trips and feeder trips to long-haul services.

3. *Creative management is important.* Do you have a creative management in place or can you develop creative management? Do you have people who are willing to look at the big picture, to look at mobility, to try non-traditional approaches, and to use new tools? There are a lot of new tools out there. Or does the transit agency have a history of being a bus operator? Do they see themselves only as a bus operator, not as a mobility provider? Are there people who are saying they want to do things the way they have always been done and, if so, are they the kinds of people who have said, "We're the transit operator, we've been doing it for 50 years, we know best where to put the routes. We don't have to do market research. We don't have to know it, we just know, because we're the experts and we've been doing it...?" Creative management approaches are common among the successful agencies surveyed. These are people who are being creative thinking "outside the box."

4. *Seek private sector involvement.* Private sector involvement cannot be emphasized too much. It is very difficult to maintain a service without the private sector's support, whether it be financial, marketing, or sales assistance.

Also, Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ) grants give you the opportunity to leverage money, to go to the private

sector and say, "We've got a grant for 40 percent, if you could support 20 percent of the cost of our service and the farebox can do 40 percent. This can initiate demonstration projects and start-up service.

On the other hand, some people seem to say, "Oh, we've got CMAQ money available, let's do it. Let's try it, what the heck." And sometimes having that grant money fosters bad planning or no planning. It also makes it too easy for people not to think about the long-term commitment they are making, that is, not to think about the larger mobility commitment.

5. Identify appropriate activities. Once you know your conditions, you need to select something that is appropriate to your organization. You have to get the commitment of the organization. Will they go and do something other than fixed route? How restrictive are your labor agreements going to be? Do labor and management work together on this? You have to be realistic in picking out something that will work within your organization. And then, of course, you have to have it work within the community on the streets.

Researchers have observed several service activities. Internal circulation needs are met by: 1) general public dial-a-rides; 2) fixed route circulators; or 3) some kind of taxi-based services. Largely it is within residential communities, but in some cases it is edge downtowns. For external trips, most are feeder services, which are being done fixed route or demand response.

There is also the overall operating concept. Some agencies operate suburb-to-suburb or crosstown fixed routes, others operate only traditional radial routes. Some are using multiple transit centers with hub-and-spoke services; suburb-to-suburb express buses as opposed to local services; and limited stop services; and some have park-and-ride suburb expresses. A lot of the all-suburban operators base service on multiple timed transfer centers. Many use radial routes to connect suburban services to downtown via express buses.

Finally, transit operators are really getting into a lot of ridesharing. This is something you probably would not have heard much about ten or fifteen years ago. Now, these transit operators who seem to have the most success are becoming mobility managers. They are looking for mobility solutions, including ridesharing, which once-upon-a-time was looked at as the bane of a transit operator.

The key to what agencies choose is based on the type of movement people are trying to make, the volume of the movement, and how much flexibility they need.

6. Plan and design. For internal trips in low density residential areas, virtually everybody uses the taxi-based or demand response circulators, if they are doing anything at all. In middle density areas, people are moving up from the demand response to fixed-route. In mixed-use development or edge cities, there is less flexible services and more fixed-route services and connections to the regional network. Today, some of these edge cities contain as much employment as some of the older, traditional central business districts that people have been serving for years with these same kinds of services. The mind set now has to be that the larger suburban areas are becoming as big as some urban areas.

Finally, whatever the type of service, you have to have reasonable objectives: integrate with a regional service; make existing services more effective; meet employer requests; respond to suburban needs, regulation, and policy; and satisfy political concerns. And always remember your bottom line, because somebody, sooner or later, is going to say, "Why in hell are you spending so much money to move ten people?"

7. Develop and maintain the services. Once you select a concept plan and design it carefully, the goal is to try to be as competitive as possible to the car. Here, evaluation criteria become critical to measuring success. Agencies using the traditional measures (total trips, cost recovery, and productivity) tend to report a lot of failures. It is very important to look at a broader societal perspective, not just to look at direct benefits but also to look at the livable communities, development objectives, air quality objectives, and to get all of the benefits into assessing a project. This includes contributing to regional transportation and land use plans and policies; Clean Air Act compliance efforts, congestion management, or other regulation; and overall cost savings with the Americans with Disabilities Act.