

## A POLICY ISSUE PERSPECTIVE: LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

---

*Fred Kent*  
*Project for Public Spaces, Inc.*

America's transit facilities and surface rail stations are facing many problems today. In many instances, even the most basic amenities, such as adequate seating, lighting, and even bathroom facilities are lacking. Oftentimes, there is no facility manager or security provider on the premises to provide day-to-day maintenance, particularly on the weekends when many of these facilities close early or are not open at all. There is frequently no place to buy food, enjoy a cup of coffee, or learn about scheduled community events and activities. Through our discussions with numerous transit agencies across the country and through our national research studies for the Transportation Research Board, it has become clear that great potential and many opportunities exist to rectify this situation, primarily as part of cooperative efforts with individual passenger communities. Local organizations in some communities have already expressed interest in becoming involved in both the planning and implementation of facility improvement programs, which serve to make these facilities more of an integral part of the communities they serve.

The kinds of improvements that we are thinking about are designed to transform transit facilities into true centers of their communities as well as more effective promoters of public transportation.

To *integrate* transportation into the community vision requires a *different process* than transportation planners currently use, and one which they cannot undertake alone. It also requires a different set of skills and a broader view of how transportation fits in or responds to community needs. For example, when renovating an existing or designing a new transit facility, a program of uses and criteria need to be established in conjunction with the community for the design and location of specific functions within the public spaces of the facility *before the design* is developed. This will insure appropriate and mutually acceptable uses and create the opportunity for the community to share responsibility for ongoing maintenance and management of the Facility and the adjacent public spaces.

### A NEW AGENDA

Establishing more effective relationships between Transit Facilities and the communities in which they are located is one of the components of the work that PPS undertook with

NJ Transit over a four year period. The idea is that by developing facilities that have active, publicly oriented uses and programs that involve the community, security will be improved, revenues will increase, riders will be attracted and facilities can begin to become catalysts for economic development in the surrounding areas.

1. *Partnerships with Communities to Manage Facilities.* Many opportunities exist for transit authorities to develop alternative ways of managing these facilities in which the community plays a role and generates an income stream for carrying out these management responsibilities. In order to manage and maintain transit facilities in a manner that is required to adequately serve passengers needs, a mechanism for providing on-site management on a regular basis needs to be developed. A "caretaker," who would oversee the daily cleaning and maintenance of a facility and who would be on-site to handle and resolve problems as they arose is needed; however, this is a service that a transit authority usually is not able to provide. One alternative is to create a public/private partnership between transit authorities and individual communities to share responsibility for ongoing maintenance and management of the facility and the adjacent public spaces. The public/private partnership concept addresses such issues as supplementing existing maintenance and security services, retail leasing, coordination of customer and community information etc.

One method of generating the revenue required to fund the implementation of many facility improvements and activities is by increasing and/or dedicating parking fees to this purpose. These moneys would be deposited into a fund that would be administered by a Downtown Management Association or another entity which would be responsible for facility management.

Some of the specific activities that would be undertaken by the Partnership organization would include:

- Working with the community to define issues and potential solutions and to implement some changes
- Provide low level maintenance to the facility building and grounds surrounding it (not major capitol improvements)
  - Security
  - Landscaping
  - Establish the informational and amenity needs of the community
  - Developing incubator retail opportunities with the community including markets and Passenger Service Centers.

In addition, we feel that transit authorities should provide, at every facility, a basic set of goods and services which passengers and visitors can come to expect when they arrive at any station in the system. Such a package of services could include a newsstand, and vendors, selling coffee and baked goods. This basic set of services could then be expanded upon by a community into a *Passenger Service Center*, which might also provide drop off service for dry cleaning, film and shoe repair, and where a wider selection of goods and services available in the larger community would also be available to transit customers.

2. **Community Based Process.** A different process needs to be used for making improvements in which the community is integrally involved in all phases from the definition of the problems to developing ways of making changes to actual implementation. This process should grow out of an understanding of community needs, and requires the following:

- **A User/Community Based Approach.** In future projects, we recommend that a process be used by transit authorities in developing plans for facilities that creates an opportunity for Transit Departments (such as Operations, Real Estate, and Planning) and the community to provide valuable input into the development of the concept. In this way peoples' knowledge and experience will become part of the process that creates optimal designs, rather than something that impacts the project after design is well underway.

PPS recommends the following general outline for a user/community based process that could be used by Transit agencies in cooperation with their passenger communities in future facility improvement projects:

- Collect data regarding passenger use and perceptions of the particular site including observations of circulation patterns, parking, interviews with passengers, retailers, personnel, etc.
- Meet with relevant personnel to present the results of the observations and interviews.
- Present and discuss issues with the community concerning the existing facility, including alternative ways of dealing with issues and ideas for organization of functions for both the exterior and interior of the facility.
- Develop design criteria that support intended uses and a functional layout of

uses for the facility.

- Develop design according to the above criteria.
- Review functions and discuss various architectural styles with local community.
- Refine design and present to Transit agencies and the community.

- **Implementation of Short Term Strategies.** These are strategies that can be implemented quickly, easily, and inexpensively. They bring quick results which piques the community's interest and involvement, and demonstrates what can be achieved. Art or horticulture projects, weekend farmers markets in empty parking lots and improved signage are just a few examples of what can take place.

- **Drawing Upon Specialized Skills.** Transportation planners, architects, urban designers, and other professions then provide the skills necessary to accommodate community needs.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

As we have progressed in developing recommendations for providing a higher level of amenity to passengers at numerous US transit facilities, a number of broader issues have continued to emerge in every facility that we have visited in other cities and towns around the country. These issues represent major stumbling blocks to effecting change or making improvements to transit facilities.

1. *Facility Management.* Currently, many train and bus transfer stations that we have visited do not have regular on-site management. In many facilities tickets, transit related information, beverages, newspapers, etc., if available are only available for limited hours. At other times the facilities are usually closed. And although general maintenance of the facilities is provided, small scale maintenance and cleaning is not done on a regular basis giving facilities the appearance of being uncared for and unmanaged.

2. *Station Building Use.* There are many transit buildings that are empty and boarded up, giving an extremely negative image to potential riders of a given rail system. And even in those buildings that have been adapted for other purposes, their function and image as a transit facility is often nullified by the prominence of these other uses.

3. *Security.* There is a concern by passengers in some communities that the transit facilities are not safe. This perception (which is more perception than reality at most facilities) is created by several elements, such as boarded up or closed buildings, un-maintained, poorly lit parking lots, litter, graffiti, etc. which have a major impact on it on users sense of safety and security.

4. *Connection to the Community.* A connection to the communities in which they are located is essential to the successful functioning of these facilities. This can occur in several ways ranging from improved sidewalks or new crosswalks to facilitate pedestrian access to a facility, to information about the communities in the facilities, to the involvement of people in the communities on an ongoing basis in making improvements to the facilities such as planting flowers, painting murals, operating retail carts or kiosks, etc.

However, in many of the communities, these connections are lacking and the facility has little other than a negative impact on the communities in which they are located. In some communities, the traffic is moving so fast that pedestrians have difficulty crossing the street between the Facility and the far parking lots, while in other towns there is no crosswalk or stop light between the parking lots and the adjacent retail and residential areas.

5. *Amenities.* We found that the amenities installed at historic or landmarked facilities frequently do not reflect or complement the historic style of the structures themselves. Historic amenity standards need to be developed for the following: benches, information kiosks, signage, advertising panels, telephones, newsboxes, light fixtures and lamp posts, and waste receptacles. Furthermore, the location and grouping of amenities at each facility should be reconsidered and guidelines developed to govern their placement.

6. *Retail.* When a transit authority leases a transit facility to a tenant or a retail concession, they often do not require that the facility also be open for passenger use. Where

there is public use, there are no standards to govern and guide the retailers display of goods, signage, etc. Moreover, in the case of the adaptive reuse of a facility, the transit authority often does not select the architect and contractor to carry out the redesign, nor does it have the ability to closely monitor the rehabilitation work being done to the interior (or exterior) of a historic building.

7. *Process.* The way that transportation planning (both mass transit and vehicular) is currently being done in this country makes it difficult for transportation to become integrated with or to assist a community in realizing the vision it has developed for itself, nor does most transportation planning take into account the needs of a community as a matter of course.

We think that the New Agenda we've outlined here will prove as useful for operations people as it is for the community and transit customers. It will result in a much more efficient and workable design of transit facilities and adjacent areas and will help promote ownership by both Transit agencies and communities, because the community's values and interests are both expressed and realized. To a community, a transit facility is more than just a building or a place to wait before leaving town. If conceived in an appropriate manner, it can be as important as a library, a city hall, or a community's central square. When this larger purpose is realized, people become proud of and care for these facilities, and the beneficiaries are Transit agencies, transit customers, and community residents.

Thank you.