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PUBLIC TRANSIT IMPROVEMENTS THAT WOULD BETTER SERVE OLDER PERSONS

What makes some transit services better than others in terms of their abilities to meet the needs of older travelers? The first step must be recognizing the specific needs and demands of older travelers. The next step, responding to those needs and demands, involves reconfiguring current services, practices, and organizations. A final step would be establishing and providing viable, cost-effective services. This chapter discusses elements of the first two steps and looks at improvements to public transportation in near-term and long-term timeframes.

PREFERRED TRAVEL ATTRIBUTES: BOTH USER AND OPERATOR PERSPECTIVES

As described in the previous two chapters, older persons and transportation providers see the key features of ideal transportation services in nearly the same terms:

- Reliable departure and arrival times;
- Door-to-door service;
- Flexible service available on demand (no 24-hour waits for trips);
- Services available during more hours of the day and more days of the week; and
- Connections between a wider range of origins and destinations.

Other key improvements recognized by transportation providers include one central number to call for “one-stop transportation shopping” and reduced walking distances to fixed-route bus services.

Older persons also see comfortable vehicles and waiting areas as key features. The focus groups of older persons and the groups of transportation providers agreed that all of these transportation system attributes were important service features.

Materials from other sources showed a high level of congruence with the findings of this study. Other research has indicated that the mobility preferences of older persons are focused on reliability (on-time services with a guaranteed ride home) and door-to-door service (which includes little or no exposure to inclement weather). Service quality has also been a key issue, particularly with respect to personal safety and “consideration” shown to older passengers by transit drivers. Cost has often been mentioned, but not as the highest priority item (at least for most potential older passengers). A significant obstacle to transit use for many older persons is needing to learn how to use the system. Most current methods of disseminating information on routes, schedules, and fares are not meeting the needs of the older traveler market.

To better serve older travelers, the public transportation industry needs to change the negative perceptions of public transportation held by many seniors into perception of public transportation as a customer-oriented and friendly industry. The concept of fitting the service to the needs of the customer—instead of fitting the customer’s needs to the service—is one that senior focus group participants urged for the transportation industry.

NEAR-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING PUBLIC TRANSIT SERVICES

Participants in the senior focus groups were asked what they would recommend to their local public transit authority if they were asked for their advice on how to make public transportation better for seniors.

Consensus Near-Term Transit Improvements

On the basis of the results of all the focus groups of older persons, an overall consensus list of near-term transit improvements was developed and includes the items listed below.

- Improve schedule reliability (or find means of providing accurate information on departures and arrivals, such as technologies that provide real-time information on actual arrival times).
- Provide “guaranteed ride home” services.
- Find ways of welcoming persons who are unaccustomed to using the service.
- Find ways to help seniors board vehicles when needed.
- Improve information and provide much more of it, both for trip planning and during travel.
- Add customer service features such as calling out stops, reserving more seats for older persons, providing more friendly and more detailed travel information, providing more telephone lines for information, and making systems more responsive to complaints by performing the following:
 - Working with human service organizations and volunteer agencies to better service the more specialized travel needs and

- Partnering with representatives of the aging community to build additional community support for more local transit funding.
- Provide special vehicles for special events.
- Develop programs to encourage seniors to try using public transportation.
- Minimize physical barriers such as steep or long stairs, and standing and waiting outside in all kinds of weather for long periods.
- Put an emphasis on polite, courteous drivers.

A number of public transportation providers currently provide such service features; were these features provided more widely, public transportation could be significantly more attractive to older travelers.

Recommendations from Particular Focus Groups of Older Persons

Distinctions among the results from the various focus groups of older persons may be useful in suggesting different strategies for differing kinds of communities and the kinds of transportation options available.

Maryland: Higher Income, Suburban Metro Area Residents

Participants in the transit-riders' focus group in Maryland suggested

- More advertising on radio, television, and the Internet;
- More programs in senior centers showing how the system works;
- Subsidies for seniors;
- More and better parking facilities;
- Good maps and timetables in grocery stores and other locations where they can be easily seen and accessed;

- Enhanced information services; and
- An Internet service in which transit riders could enter their origin and destination and then receive full travel instructions and directions.

The Maryland seniors who did not regularly use transit emphasized the need for better information: "How do you find out what it costs?" "How do you find out where they are going?" Information for trip planning was seen as crucial, particularly for determining how close transit would stop to the desired destination. There were several reports of frustration with the telephone information services. Members of the group also called for better directional signs.

New York City: Moderate- and Low-Income Center City Residents

Recommendations of the bus riders in New York City included

- Reserving more seats for elderly riders;
- Eliminating the articulated buses;
- Announcing all stops;
- Making the buses kneel for everyone;
- Improving schedule reliability;
- Providing shelters at all bus stops;
- Putting street signs lower so that they can be read from inside the buses;
- Extending handrails to full length in trains and buses; and
- Improving accessibility features on all parts of the transit system.

Recommendations from the paratransit riders in New York City mirrored their perceptions of ideal transportation services:

- Greater driver awareness of the needs and vulnerabilities of the elderly;
- Door-to-door service;

- On-time service;
- Safe and clean services;
- More information and education about the paratransit service;
- Places to sit while waiting for paratransit; and
- The ability to change schedules when using the ADA paratransit service.

Akron: Moderate- and Lower-Income Small Metro Suburban Residents

Recommendations for improving transit services for seniors from the transit riders in the Akron suburbs included the following:

- Make more service available on an emergency basis (same-day scheduling);
- Improve services;
- Provide better training for the staff who schedule rides;
- Improve customer service;
- Extend transit service 2 hours later into the evening (that is, end at 8 p.m. instead of 6 p.m.); and
- Provide better on-time performance, especially for return trips.

Many of the transit riders in the Akron suburbs were well satisfied with the services they were receiving and did not have specific suggestions for improvements. One transit rider stated: “My message to the transit authority would be, thank you, I need you at this time in my life. That is what I would say.”

The seniors who did not regularly use transit in the Akron suburbs suggested that transit could be improved in the following ways:

- Instituting the ability to respond to emergency calls;
- Being on time;

- Providing accessible door-to-door, real-time scheduling (not having to call ahead);
- Providing the ability to make multiple trips (Geauga permits this, with an extra charge);
- Providing easy to understand information;
- Providing service at a reasonable cost;
- Employing drivers and other staff who care about older riders;
- Providing improved customer service (a big problem area, as previously noted); and
- Making service available in evenings and on weekends.

Geauga County: Moderate- and Lower-Income Rural Residents

The focus groups in Geauga County looked for improvements such as the following:

- Same-day scheduling;
- More certain pickup and dropoff times;
- Fixed-route service in addition to paratransit service;
- Regular service at regular times;
- Access to destinations in neighboring counties; and
- Evening and weekend service.

LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENTS TO PUBLIC TRANSIT

Strengths and Weaknesses of Current Transit Services

Public transit performs many critical functions in our society. It moves large numbers of travelers efficiently, is often more environmentally friendly than other modes, and makes possible a density of land use development that is highly valued

by many people. However, the ways in which our public mass transit systems are presently configured do not meet many of the travel needs of our older citizens.

In the focus groups of older persons, the most positive attributes of fixed-route public transit services were seen as low cost, the ability (independence) to come and go on one's own schedule (when one's personal schedule matched with the schedules for transit service), and the amenities associated with traveling as a passenger (reading, watching the world go by, etc.). Paratransit services received positive ratings on assistance from drivers, door-to-door service, and assistance with special needs. All of these attributes were expressed as somewhat positive rather than as strongly positive attributes.

The negative attributes of public transit services were generally expressed in strongly negative terms. Strong negatives for transit were the lack of reliable service, difficulties in getting travel information, and problems in dealing with transit staff (other than drivers). Paratransit services received strongly negative ratings on reliability, interactions with dispatchers and other non-driving staff, and slow trip speeds. Transit and paratransit services also had somewhat negative ratings for hours of service availability, and paratransit services had negative ratings on eligibility requirements.

The contrast in preferred travel attributes between automobile travel and transit travel—shown in Table 22—could hardly be more striking. At least for those seniors participating in the focus groups, the strengths of automobile travel are often directly juxtaposed against the weaknesses of public transit—at least, as those transit services are most frequently offered at the

present time. On all the travel attributes that seniors reported as most highly valued—reliability, proximity, flexibility, and comfort—automobiles were rated very highly and transit modes were rated poorly.

Many travel attributes of automobiles received strongly positive ratings, including connections with many origins and destinations, protection from adverse weather conditions, door-to-door connections, flexibility, responsiveness, availability at all hours, and personal independence. Automobiles also received positive ratings on a number of other factors; the only negative ratings were in terms of cost and personal safety (primarily concerns about other drivers). Table 19 showed that taxis had the next most strongly positive ratings, but had strongly negative ratings on trip cost. The automobile passenger mode shared many of the strongly positive ratings with driving and taxis, but traveling according to the schedules of others and being obligated to those persons were strongly negative features of the passenger mode.

Public mass transit—usually meaning big buses operating on fixed routes and fixed schedules—has trouble matching these and other attributes of private automobile transportation. Compared with the private automobile, public mass transit has these problematic characteristics:

- **Connects fewer origins and destinations.** The availability of public transit varies from community to community, indeed even from one neighborhood to another. Traditionally, inner cities have had the most accessible public transit services, with the suburbs and the rural areas following far behind. As more older persons are living in the suburbs, and many are relocating even farther away to more rural or sparsely populated areas, the issue of the availability and efficiency of public transit takes on new meaning. Many

Table 22

Automobile vs. Transit Assessments by Older Persons

Concepts Measures	Travel Modes			
	Automobile		Transit	Paratransit
	Driver	Passenger		
ACCEPTABILITY				
<i>Reliability: departure and arrival times</i>	Positive		Strongly negative	Strongly negative
Origin/destination connectivity	Strongly positive	Strongly positive	Negative	
Trust and confidence		Negative		
Image/attractiveness				Negative
Amenities	Positive	Positive	Positive	
Safety/security	Negative	Negative	Negative	
Service quality: vehicles clean				
<i>Comfort: vehicles</i>	Positive	Positive	Negative	
<i>Comfort: protection from weather</i>	Strongly positive	Strongly positive	Negative	
Service quality: drivers				Positive
Service quality: dispatchers	NA	NA	Strongly negative	Strongly negative
ACCESSIBILITY				
Can physically use the system		Positive	Mixed	Positive
<i>Proximity</i>	Strongly positive	Strongly positive	Negative	
Can get information on services		Negative	Strongly negative	
ADAPTABILITY				
<i>Flexibility</i>	Strongly positive	Strongly negative		Negative
Responsiveness of service	Strongly positive			Mixed
Assistance with special needs	Positive			Positive
Eligibility				Negative
Public participation in service planning				
AVAILABILITY				
Service span (hours/days)	Strongly positive		Negative	Negative
Sufficiency				
Frequency				
Independence	Strongly positive	Strongly negative	Positive	
AFFORDABILITY				
\$ Cost per ride [or per month or year]	Negative		Positive	
Time required	Positive		Mixed	Strongly negative
Level of effort				
Obligations to others	Positive	Strongly negative		
Legend				
Measures most highly valued by seniors	<i>italic text</i>	Large differences in automobile/transit assessments	bold text	

locations outside of central cities are not served at all by public transit or are served so poorly that travel to and from these locations requires many times the travel time required by automobile.

- **Provides service at fewer times of the day and on fewer days of the week.** Most public transit services do not operate late at night, on weekends, or on holidays. People such as the elderly, who wish to travel at these times, are

seldom able to make public transit connections. As more jobs shift away from the standard 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday pattern, fewer and fewer work trips will be able to be accommodated by public transit; this means that extended service hours can benefit both younger workers and older persons.

- **Appears to be more costly than automobile trips on an out-of-pocket basis.** Many automobile users do not realize the full extent of the costs they pay to operate an automobile because many of the major relevant costs—insurance, maintenance, and depreciation—are not directly associated with the cost of one specific trip but are spread out over many trips. Even some specific per-trip costs, such as parking, may be subsidized by businesses and others so that the driver may believe the trip is “free.” In fact, for most people in most communities, owning and operating a car is actually a good deal more expensive than using public transportation. The vast majority of transit systems in the United States collect their fares as a person boards the vehicle. This makes the cost of each transit trip highly visible. In contrast, parking costs and highway tolls are the only automobile expenses that are visibly associated with a particular trip; most gasoline costs are spread over multiple days and multiple trips.
- **Requires certain levels of physical and cognitive abilities for its use.** For the elderly, some of the attendant requirements of mass transit are difficult or impossible: walking to the bus stop (49 percent of those responding to Straight’s survey (1997) said that they could not walk to a bus stop if they had to), waiting in various kinds of weather (often without shelter), climbing the stairs of the bus, maintaining balance while the vehicle is in motion, and determining when and where to exit. Many people whose declining physical and cognitive abilities preclude the operation of a car are also unable to use public transportation.

Public transit may be at its greatest disadvantage when considering non-

monetary, travel-related costs and benefits. Most transit services, particularly those that operate on fixed routes and schedules, do not appear to be responsive to individual needs. Indeed, because the routes and schedules of these systems are, by definition, established on a mass or system-wide basis—rather than on an individual basis—the lack of individual control or influence on factors such as departure or arrival times is a reality. Service quality is an area in which public transit could conceivably exceed automobile travel, but on-time performance, cleanliness of vehicles, friendliness of drivers and other staff, and comfort are areas in which many transit operations need improvement. Flexibility is an arena in which automobile travel triumphs, both in terms of scheduling and routing. Many of these factors come together under the more global heading of control of one’s environment and activities, with very little control in the hands of the consumer of mass transit services. Now that we live in a world where custom orders for food, clothing, and even computers are becoming the norm, a product that is not particularly responsive to individual consumer preferences will be at a distinct disadvantage against products that focus more directly on the individual consumer.

Long-Term Improvement Objectives

Steps to long-term public transportation improvements that would provide better services for older persons appear deceptively simple; of course, they are really anything but simple. Basically, the necessary steps needed are to (1) fix the problems and (2) upgrade services. These strategies are discussed in more detail in the next two chapters.

To keep those persons involved in the public transportation improvement process

firmly grounded in reality, it's important to recognize that (1) the main competitive mode is the automobile and (2) the automobile will most likely continue to be used by the majority of older persons for the majority of their trips. Therefore, it will be necessary for public transportation providers to adopt "reasonable expectations" for the relative attractiveness of their services, particularly in contrast to the attributes of automobile travel. Still, it is possible to make improvements to services that will attract a much larger share of both older travelers and their trips than transit currently serves today.

Three fundamental objectives are likely to be the "guiding lights" of public transportation services of the future:

- More choices in travel modes and their corresponding attributes, especially price;
- A greater focus on higher quality services; and
- A greater degree of service articulation, in which travel services are more closely tailored to the specific travel needs of the individual traveler and a specific trip.

Long-term approaches to meeting a large proportion of the travel needs of tomorrow's older persons will most probably need to focus on reliable door-to-door services. These approaches may involve more use of one particular transportation mode for certain types of trips or destinations and other modes for other travel needs. These transportation modes may be combined in certain trips, resulting in more transfers but more cost-effective use of each individual mode. (Of course, transfers would have to be made more comfortable and expeditious than they are today.) As trip patterns become more varied—less work-oriented, less central business district-oriented, more spatially and temporally dispersed—they become more difficult to serve with fixed-

route transit services. Also, a greater need for specific information on the choices available for the specific trip will arise. This will necessitate a much greater role for the information function in local transportation service, probably requiring increased staff and technology to process the demands.

In the long run, multiple types of services offered at varying prices could go a long way toward replacing the "one-size-fits-all" approach to public transportation that now exists. More travel options would allow riders to choose travel services that best fit the specific demands of individual days and trips. Shared-ride, demand-responsive services, dispatched and controlled through advanced technologies, could provide higher levels of service than are now available at higher levels of productivity and cost-effectiveness. Transit industry professionals often view demand-responsive services as excessively expensive. (Ways of addressing this concern are discussed in later chapters.) Frequent, comfortable, affordable, spontaneous service to a wide variety of origins and destinations over a wide range of service hours is what seniors desire. Providing trips with these attributes may prove challenging for some transit agencies, but services of these types will be rewarded with patronage.

Overall management will be needed to organize and direct the provision of a larger variety of travel modes and services. One would expect to see some public transportation operators readily embracing this expanded "mobility manager" role, whereas other public transit providers may be content to offer work-oriented, fixed-route, fixed-schedule services. In that case, community-wide transportation management would then shift to another agency with the broader perspective.

CONCLUSION

The transportation service attributes that seniors most highly value may be difficult for some transit systems to provide: comfortable, low-cost, reliable, frequent, door-to-door, spontaneous service that serves a large variety of destinations over extended periods of time. However, even if this “best of all possible worlds” scenario is out of reach, the focus group participants—both seniors and transportation professionals—reported that there are still many steps that transit providers can take to make their services more attractive to current and potential older riders. Near-term

improvements could include improving schedule reliability (or finding a means of providing accurate information on departures and arrivals), providing “guaranteed ride home” services, finding ways of welcoming persons who are unaccustomed to using the service, helping seniors board vehicles when needed, improving travel information and providing much more of it, and adding customer service features. Long-term improvements, which may be more difficult to implement, should include offering more choices in travel modes and their corresponding attributes, focusing on higher-quality services, and creating a greater degree of service articulation.