Moving about the well-rooted office buildings, banks and industrial complexes of downtown Utica, N.Y., the buses of CENTRO of Oneida County are a constant source of energy in this small upstate city. From outlying towns and villages in the Mohawk River Valley, Centro of Oneida County vehicles traverse Genesee Street – Utica’s main downtown thoroughfare – as they ply the seven routes that ultimately congregate in the city’s center at the intersection of Genesee, Elizabeth and Bleecker Streets. Meanwhile, Centro’s bustling customer service office is stationed directly at the system’s heart – this so-called “Busy Corner” – dispensing information, bus passes and travel assistance to passengers heading throughout the region.

In the smaller urban areas of New York State, one such as Utica or its neighbor to the east, Rome, or more than a dozen others around the Empire State, a vibrant transit operation is not only a resource for the community – it’s a necessity. To keep the civic and economic hearts of these cities beating, its residents need a reliable way to access jobs, appointments and community services, or connect with another transportation mode at the train station or airport, often in the state’s famously chilling winter weather conditions.
**Prelude: Utica, 2004**

For decades, the Utica Transit Authority provided service to the city of Utica and its surrounding areas. It found stable ridership and strong support from state and local officials as an essential service in the region. Despite the backing of Utica leaders and the public, the system functioned largely due to a local economy that worked hard just to keep pace and could provide limited local dollars. Since the community valued operating as much service as possible, the Authority was able to provide few amenities considered commonplace in most transportation operations, such as the latest in new equipment like fare collection machines, or even frequently-updated timetables. Utica Transit’s staff of maintenance workers, drivers and administrators grew accustomed to doing yeoman’s work to get the best use out of every dollar available to the system.

Despite the hard work of Utica’s transit professionals and the best intentions of local officials, it appeared likely that the system would cease operations. While the State of New York – through the New York Department of Transportation – had supported the operations of transit systems across the state for decades, local contributions were always essential from each community to keep budgets balanced. When the local investment stream could not be maintained, Oneida County and City of Utica leaders approached Utica Transit officials in the fall of 2004 to warn that sufficient support for the existing system from the City could not be guaranteed beyond the end of that fiscal year in June 2005. They hoped, however, that by providing the agency enough lead-time, it might be able to craft a solution to maintain the needed level of transit service in the region.

In the face of the dire prospect of losing the city’s established transit network, the Utica Transit’s Board of Directors and staff quickly worked together to determine how to keep buses and vans rolling in Utica. Quickly jettisoned was any notion of abandoning the service; since any number of solutions would be better than leaving the community without reliable mobility options. As it turned out, Utica would only need one solution. Its name was Centro.

**Building a Regional System**

The Central New York Regional Transportation Authority, better known by its service moniker of Centro, was established in 1970 to oversee the provision of public transportation options in and around Syracuse, N.Y. By 1972, it had consolidated the operations of several public and private systems and companies, and had undertaken the direct provision of transit service to Onondaga and Cayuga counties. Over the next 30 years, the system built a reputation as a valued community asset in the Syracuse area by providing reliable service, overhauling vehicles and procedures, and expanding its ridership. These attributes were recognized by U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta in 2005 at the Community Transportation Association’s annual EXPO with a special award. In the meantime, Centro’s reputation for quality service had reached the ears of officials in Oswego County and the City of Oswego, who that year decided to transfer operation of their transit systems to the Authority.

“Since the beginning, Centro has really focused on building a strong organization – from top to bottom – and that’s paid off in more riders and expanded service,” says Centro Executive Director Frank Kobliski.

The growth of Centro did not go unnoticed by its neighbors to the east in Utica. Staff at the Utica Transit Authority had cultivated peer relationships with their counterparts at Centro, and calls to their colleagues there were among their first contacts after being informed of the potential shortfalls in funding. Beyond a show of solidarity with their colleagues in the industry, informal discussions between the two agencies quickly revealed that Centro might be able to help in maintaining transit in Utica and Rome.

“Our professional connections with our friends peers in Syracuse were like finding a safe port before a storm,” says Leslie Leone, now Assistant General Manager for Centro Oneida County, who held the same post with Utica Transit.

But before any in-depth study of that role could take place, transit staff in Utica and Rome encouraged the region’s public officials to present a formal request to Centro to help. In September of 2004, Oneida County Executive Joseph Griffio, with the support of officials at the New York State Department of Transportation, requested that Centro undertake an assessment of existing and potential public transportation service in the County. This would include those being provided by the City of Rome – also located in Oneida County – through its Rome VIP Transit, which was facing similar financial difficulties.
The county would provide financial support for the Authority to conduct the study.

Less than 60 days later, in November 2005, Centro staff reported back to Oneida County leaders. The Authority had looked into the existing operations in the County, estimated the amount of capital investment necessary to make necessary improvements to the systems, and devised a sustainable business plan to ensure continued transit service. After examining the report, Oneida county officials, along with those at the State, Utica Transit Authority and Rome VIP, were encouraged about a solution.

“The depth and soundness of the findings in Centro’s assessment – not to mention the timeline they completed it in – was absolutely astonishing,” said Griffio. “We felt that keeping our transit service was going to be possible.”

The enthusiasm and support generated by the study led leaders and officials to ask an intuitive question: why not fully collaborate with Centro by transferring all its operations into Centro’s regional network? Beyond their insights in assessing Oneida’s transit situation, the authority had a distinguished track record for providing excellent service, and – in a similar way – had already experienced the integration of an existing transit operation into their own in Oswego.

“Centro’s study was a dynamic catalyst for decision-making,” says Ron Bucciero, now General Manager for Centro of Oneida. “All signs pointed in the direction of working with them to incorporate our service into theirs.”

**Centering on Centro**

With a willingness from Oneida County, Rome, and Utica officials and Centro leadership to collaborate on maintaining transit service, the staffs at Utica Transit, Rome VIP and Centro began working to integrate operations in Oneida into the Centro framework through the fall of 2004 and winter of 2005. They worked to establish the financial procedures that would transfer the State’s existing investment and local support from Oneida County and the cities of Rome and Utica, including a new levy on mortgage recordings in the County. The Oneida County Board of Supervisors voted on March 16, 2005 to join the Central New York Regional Transportation Authority. Centro would assume operations in Utica and the surrounding areas on April 1. Centro service in Rome would begin by the end of 2005.

The new arrangement allowed for nearly all the staff of Rome VIP and Utica Transit into its new Centro of Oneida operation, from administrators to mechanics to drivers. By utilizing the foundations of the existing transit operations, the institutional knowledge, operational know-how, and community presence were not lost, but instead became immediate assets.

“We were very impressed with the skill and vision of the leadership and staff at the Oneida County providers – Utica Transit and Rome VIP – while we were conducting our study,” says Frank Kobliski. “It only made sense to keep them at the heart of our operation when we inaugurated Centro of Oneida.”

“We viewed Centro’s involvement not as a take-over, but as a tremendous partnership that would allow us to make tremendous improvements to our system,” says Leslie Leone.

Meanwhile, the new Centro of Oneida quickly began a substantial effort to upgrade the system’s infrastructure and resources. It began a year-long rehabilitation program for all of Utica’s (26) and Rome’s (6) fixed-route buses that had belonged to Utica Transit and Rome VIP, respectively. These upgrades included everything from new engines to fareboxes and destination signs. Improved wheelchair lifts and air conditioning systems were installed, and each bus was repainted with Centro’s blue-and-green color scheme.

The improvement campaign did not stop with the system’s vehicles. Utica Transit’s existing administration and maintenance facility was renovated, while a new customer service office was opened in downtown Utica to sell passes, answer questions, and, finally, offer new schedules and transit information pieces. These new capital resources were made possible through a special $2.7 million State grant as the New York Department of Transportation considered the enhanced system a start-up, and the Information Center was supported through a grant from Oneida County.

“Everything since April 1, 2005 has not just been a step forward, but a massive leap in progress,” says Ron Bucciero.

Beyond the physical improvement to the system’s infrastructure, the transition to Centro of Oneida has also delivered growth where it matters most: service improvements and on-the-ground service. Both service routes and frequencies have been increased under the new operation, and ridership has – not surprisingly – followed. The system’s fixed-route operations in Utica carried over one million riders in calendar year 2006, while more than 125,000 rode its buses in Rome. At the same time, Centro of Oneida’s Call-A-Ride demand-response network provided trips for nearly 24,000 passengers in Utica and more than 13,000 in Rome. Those ridership statistics also delivered growth where it matters: service improvements and on-the-ground service. Both service routes and frequencies have been increased under the new operation, and ridership has – not surprisingly – followed. The system’s fixed-route operations in Utica carried over one million riders in calendar year 2006, while more than 125,000 rode its buses in Rome. At the same time, Centro of Oneida’s Call-A-Ride demand-response network provided trips for nearly 24,000 passengers in Utica and more than 13,000 in Rome. Those ridership statistics also marked record highs for transit ridership in Oneida County.

“Our passengers have really responded to the improvements that occurred under Centro, and have done so in the most important area – ridership,” says Bucciero. “We’ve had a very strong and positive reaction from the community, and it is nearly always to the tune of ‘we can really see the transit system is going to be here for a while with all these changes.’”
Continuing the Progress
While Centro’s work at both solidifying and improving the transit network of Oneida County is indeed laudable, it has no intention of resting. The Authority plans to capitalize on its momentum by continuing to invest resources to improve the operation. Using the institutional knowledge gained by Centro of Onondaga County’s recent construction of a new administration and maintenance facility in Syracuse, Centro has begun planning and design work to build a new combined facility for its Oneida County operations. This new facility will be strategically located between Utica and Rome. The facility will feature the latest in maintenance equipment and technology, and allow for more efficient operations and administration throughout the county.

Additionally, the system’s presence in the downtowns of both Utica and Rome will be expanded. In Utica, a new transfer facility is being planned to improve access and comfort for passengers and bus drivers alike by devoting a block of a downtown street exclusively to Centro vehicles. There, passengers will be able to connect between routes within just a few feet, and will feature new shelters, bike storage, information displays and other amenities. Rome, meanwhile, will find a new transit center, including a staffed information office similar to Utica’s, and a more convenient location to transfer between routes.

The system continues to respond to steady population and economic growth in the region by studying its routes and schedules to continue to bolster ridership. New development projects at the Griffiss Technology Park – a former military base to the east of downtown Rome – has Centro officials working to find more ways to connect riders to new job opportunities there. The county has also seen significant arrivals of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Africa to the region in the past five years, and is active working with community representatives to better address their needs, including informational workshops and translated schedules and printed materials to provide accurate transit information.

“We’re finding incredible optimism, both from our staff and the community, on what lies ahead for us,” says Bucciero, who, along with his colleagues, was absolutely beaming when presented the opportunity to discuss the future. “It’s as if we’ve not only turned a page, but we’re writing a whole new book now.”

Centro’s Utica Information Center is positioned in the heart of the city.