

# Pioneering Emission-Free Transit in Chattanooga

by Rich Sampson

*In a city with a well-chronicled transportation history (think: Choo-Choo!), the Chattanooga Area Regional Transportation Authority (CARTA) has embraced an altogether modern approach to urban transit — with its now 16-year old downtown electric bus shuttles leading the way. As more local residents turn to CARTA— a record 1.8 million riders did last year — the system has a number of innovative projects and services it plans to offer in the next several years.*

In southeastern Tennessee, the CARTA owns and operates the Lookout Mountain Incline Railway, built in 1865 to scale the mountain's 72 percent grade — the steepest in the world. The incline bypassed a circuitous winding road, which took up to four hours to the summit in the nineteenth century. More than a mile long, the two railcars move passengers up and down the slope in about ten minutes and depart every 20 minutes. Since 1911, electricity has powered the incline's two 100-horsepower

motors, allowing for emission-free transportation for nearly a century.

“As our Incline attendance grows, we are constantly striving to provide the safest, most enjoyable view Chattanooga has to offer,” says CARTA Executive Director Tom Dugan.

Beyond the cache of operating the region's first emissions-free vehicles, CARTA offers an even more extensive fleet of zero-emissions buses on its popular Downtown Electric Shuttle. The Shuttle circulates area residents and tourists alike along three routes to Chattanooga's prominent attractions — including the Chattanooga Choo-Choo railroad history complex, the Tennessee Aquarium and the riverfront. Downtown Electric Shuttle buses operate about every five minutes during normal service hours every day of the week.

More impressively, CARTA has been operating the routes with its electric



buses since 1992, moving over 11.3 million passengers across 1.9 million miles and saving more than 65 tons of pollutants from being released into the air. At the same time, it collects no fares from passengers to encourage ridership and help support local businesses and attractions with a steady flow of foot traffic.

The electric buses have always attracted additional ridership — particularly from non-traditional bus riders due to the smooth and quiet ride they offer. These buses allow CARTA to build a positive image and partnerships all around the city.

For CARTA, the distinctiveness of both the Downtown Shuttle and the Lookout Mountain Incline reflect the agency's approach to serving the community.

CARTA's Lookout Mountain Incline has operated emission-free since 1911.



Winding along the shores of the Tennessee River and the base of Lookout Mountain, the CARTA fashions itself a unique type of mobility provider — like the exceptional area it serves. In addition to its 16 fixed bus routes serving the city of Chattanooga and Hamilton County, and its Care-A-Van curb-to-curb demand-responsive service, CARTA also offers several distinctive mobility options that have ingrained it in the community spirit of the southeastern Tennessee region.

“We're very proud of how we're able to provide services that are not considered traditional by transit standards,” Dugan explains. “But we don't stop there. We consider our entire public transportation network — our regular bus routes and Care-A-Van service — part of the community fabric of the Chattanooga area.”



CARTA operates a fleet of different vehicles to serve southeastern Tennessee.

That mindset not only applies to the system's uncharacteristic elements, but also equally to its core fixed route and Care-A-Van services. Since the City of Chattanooga and Hamilton County worked together to purchase the assets of the Southern Coach Lines in 1971, CARTA and its Board of Directors have focused on prioritizing the needs of its passengers. It introduced a 100% accessible fleet in 1999, developed an unlimited-ride monthly pass for only \$40 in 1986 and partners with the locally-based Siskin rehabilitation hospital to offer travel training services.

CARTA has found that its range of services are more popular than ever due to the higher costs of gasoline. In 2007, more than 1.8 million riders

took trips on CARTA, compared with around 1.6 million passengers in 2005 – representing ridership growth of more than 9 percent in just two years. The system's leaders believe most of the increase is directly attributable to higher fuel costs, especially when its \$40 monthly pass is nearly the same cost as a single full tank of gas.

“With gas prices unlikely ever to drop below \$3.25 per gallon again, our service, especially matched with our \$40 monthly pass, becomes incredibly attractive for the community,” says Dugan.

With ridership soaring and its unique service models forged into the community's identity, CARTA leaders believe it's no time to sit back. Among its upcoming plans are projects to

implement a comprehensive Intelligent Transportation System. The primary focus of the integration of new technology will be to vastly improve the information flow both internally and to customers. By building support and goodwill throughout the region by offering responsive, efficient and reliable services, CARTA expects its plans to move forward on community agendas.

“We think the region expects us to move forward to continue to provide more and better service,” Dugan says. “It's crucial not only to our vitality as a transportation provider, but more importantly to our vibrancy as a metropolitan community.”

The Electric Shuttle has been providing zero-emissions travel in downtown Chattanooga since 1992.

