rabbitEXPRESS: Connectivity in the Mid-Atlantic Region

By Rich Sampson

Every weekday morning at 4:40 a.m., a bus pulls out of the downtown Transfer Center in York, Pa., bound for Baltimore’s northern suburbs. The early morning trip on the 83S route operated by rabbittransit – York’s regional public transportation provider – travels south from the Transfer Center stationed along the banks of Codorus Creek along Interstate 83 to reach the suburban communities of Hunt Valley, Timonium and Towson. Its six daily roundtrips – three in the morning and the same number in the evening – are a vital link for workers, students, seniors and many others in the mid-Atlantic region.

The 83S is one of three regional express routes rabbittransit launched within the past half-decade to improve connectivity in the region. The routes – branded rabbitEXPRESS by the transit system – connect York with Pennsylvania’s capital city in Harrisburg, one of the nation’s most historically significant communities in Gettysburg, and the large metropolitan region in northern Maryland. In concert, rabbitEXPRESS marks a new way of envisioning how transit can unite communities and regions, offers an array of intermodal connections and attracts scores of new riders.

Taking the Initial Risk

Located 25 miles south of Harrisburg, 100 miles west of Philadelphia and 50 miles north of Baltimore, York hugs the western reaches of the mid-Atlantic mega-region, home to a population registering in the tens of millions. The White Rose City – York’s unofficial title – is a typical small urban area, with a population of more than 43,000, and once served, for a brief moment, as the capital of the United States, from October, 1777 to June, 1778. And for decades, rabbittransit had focused on serving the York community with reliable and efficient local transit ser-
vice within the city and surrounding York County (the system rebranded and changed its name in 2000 from the York County Transit Authority). Operating more than a dozen fixed-route bus lines, along with demand-response paratransit service, the agency had established a solid reputation as a resource to mobilize the community.

However, as the agency’s leaders and local officials worked together in the late ‘90s to revitalize the service’s image and brand as rabbittransit, they also began to consider how the system could expand its reach on a regional basis and become a more dynamic participant in shaping the region’s travel habits. But changing names, logos and paint colors wasn’t enough. Already, thousands of York residents were commuting daily to Harrisburg to work in state government positions, and activity was growing at that city’s medical centers and the campuses of Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC). Could transit serve a role in providing drivers an alternative to the increasingly busy Interstate 83 and Harrisburg’s downtown parking lots, when regular commuter options along the corridor hadn’t been available since the days of the Pennsylvania and Baltimore & Ohio railroads?

Before buying any new buses or establishing schedules, rabbittransit officials and local leaders wanted to be sure a market existed for such a service. After identifying a Harrisburg-York option in 1999, the system’s planners worked with the York County Planning Commission (YCPC) – the region’s metropolitan planning organization – to determine the route’s feasibility. That process not only considered the potential for ridership, operations costs and fare structures, but also began collecting input from existing commuters on their travel needs and the fare ranges that would make commuting by transit attractive. The transit agency established a stand-alone website, www.fedupcommuters.com, that encouraged feedback from drivers on their commuting experience. Next, rabbittransit staff posted campaign-style posters at key congestion points along the corridor to ramp-
By late 2005, the agency had their answer. After analyzing both the planning work done by YCPC and the Fed Up Commuters campaign, rabbittransit determined sufficient demand existed for a basic commuter shuttle service between the two cities. Using investment through the federal Congestion Mitigation & Air Quality (CMAQ) program, and support from state and local sources, rabbittransit acquired three body-on-chassis vehicles in the hopes of attracting 50 daily riders each way, uncertain whether riders would actually materialize to support the new service. As it turns out, their estimates understated the pent-up demand for commuter service. By the second week of operation for the new rabbitEXPRESS, the trips were standing room only, and the true measure of interest in the service was in the hundreds, not 50s. The rapid, positive response to the new service aligned along factors and expectations that traditionally draw new riders to transit: affordability, convenience, travel time and customer experience. Although the buses don’t travel the route much faster than a private vehicle because of the already-busy I-83, rabbitEXPRESS offered superior cost savings on fuel and parking when compared with driving, along with more convenient departure and arrival locations as well as a vastly more enjoyable daily commuting experience.

Led by the system’s Executive Director Richard Farr, rabbittransit scrambled to find bigger buses to accommodate their suddenly popular service. Through investment from the federal Job Access and Reverse Commuter (JARC) program, the agency purchased used large buses to operate the service and assigned the body-on-chassis vehicles to its curb-to-curb paratransit operation. Today, the route – known as 83N – provides eight daily roundtrips between York and Harrisburg serving 2,324 riders each month, and connects with Harrisburg’s Capital Area Transit, Amtrak routes to New York, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh at the Harrisburg train station as well as Greyhound and Megabus intercity bus lines at the same location. Riders are not only drawn by the service’s frequent trips, multiple convenient stop locations in Harrisburg and connections to intercity bus and rail options, but also a rider experience that makes the trip more enjoyable than driving alone.

“We were intentionally deliberate when planning this service,” says Farr. “We were hoping to appeal to passengers who generally were not already transit riders, so we had to be sure what we offered matched their expectations. We spent a lot of time and energy getting input and feedback from riders.
Before we do anything, we get input.”

The Importance of the Travel Experience

The awareness of what rabbitEXPRESS riders expected in their transit experience quickly became the hallmark of the new commuter operation. On the system’s standard fixed route bus lines in-and-around York and the surrounding county, most passengers already were familiar with the transit experience. The availability of the trip itself was enough to attract and maintain a steady base of riders. But commuters had the luxury of already commuting by private vehicles, and could easily return to those options if the service fell short. For these riders, customer service and a good travel experience were the key.

Fortunately, leaders at rabbittransit were prepared for commuters’ expectations. Through the Fed Up Commuters effort, Farr and his colleagues knew commuters sought not only a dependable and affordable ride, but also ongoing communication and outreach, added amenities such as free wireless internet access, and the ability to reach their intended destination as quickly and as hassle-free as possible. That meant that rabbitEXPRESS commuters expected up-to-the-minute details on delays and schedule changes, feedback and input procedures that ensured their concerns were being addressed and in-person interaction with the system’s leadership to guarantee accountability. Customer responsiveness was – and is – a long-standing focus at rabbittransit, so this customer-oriented effort simply tapped into that organizational strength. The agency’s staff responded, regularly riding along on trips to Harrisburg, constructing an easy-to-update website and creating a real-time bus tracking application for smart phones to keep riders posted on any service disruptions.

“Communication is key,” says Farr. “We’ve built a strong level of trust by instilling a culture of responsiveness, but that’s only as good as how often we respond. This is an unending process, and we thrive on that.”

To illustrate the unique environment of rider expectations, Farr shares the following story: early on in the rabbitEXPRESS operation, one rider was very apprehensive about the commuting-by-transit concept. Farr rode along with her one day to get her input, and throughout the 45-minute trip from York to Harrisburg, she firmly gripped the handrail on the seat ahead of her, the portrait of tension. When Farr asked what was wrong, she only replied, “nervous.” Just a few months later, the riders on that trip had organized a holiday party en-route, and invited Farr to celebrate with them. When he arrived, that same rider was the first to offer a slice of cake – fully emersed in the habits and spirit of the downtown.
of a commuting collective.

“Our riders on the rabbitEXPRESS aren’t taking it because it’s the fastest way to get from York to Harrisburg,” explains Farr. “This is a quality-of-life decision. Passengers enjoy not worrying about the stress of driving, finding a parking spot, paying for gas and car maintenance, having access to their e-mail and internet the whole trip, and knowing when the bus is coming, to the minute. It’s a specific challenge, but we feel we’ve grabbed a hold of it and are making it work.”

A Real Kind of Coordination

To the extent that rabbitEXPRESS had created a dynamic, interactive model for providing commuter transit service in the York – Harrisburg corridor, the system began exploring opportunities to apply that model to other routes in the region. Armed with the lessons and experiences of the 83N route, rabbittransit launched the 83S line to the Baltimore suburbs in February 2009. The operation marked a new challenge for the rabbitEXPRESS concept. While the 83N route benefited from a stable cohort of state office and medical workers, along with students and faculty heading to HACC, the travel market between southern Pennsylvania and northern Maryland was less predictable, although traffic congestion on that stretch of Interstate 83 was likewise growing.

The agency identified a series of office and industrial parks in the Hunt Valley and Timonium communities in Maryland, along with stops on the Maryland Transit Administration’s (MTA) light-rail line, which linked those communities with downtown Baltimore, Baltimore-Washington International Airport (BWI) and other areas south of Baltimore. Applying the aggressive communications and outreach effort from the 83N route to its southbound counterpart, rabbittransit officials learned that its initial stops were not close enough to key employment destinations such as AAI Corp., in Hunt Valley, Black & Decker in Towson and the Towson Commons commercial district, and re-routed the line to serve those locations more directly. Moreover, the system worked with Towson University – Maryland’s second largest public university – to better connect with the school’s shuttle operation on Chesapeake Avenue. Today, the line’s six daily roundtrips are operating at 75 percent capacity, drawing a mix of commuters, Towson University students, faculty and staff, travellers heading to downtown Baltimore or BWI on the MTA light rail, and others reaching shopping, social service programs and medical appointments in northern Maryland.

The interstate route overcome obstacles that often derail regional transit efforts elsewhere. For many transit systems, crossing a single county line within a state represents a sizable challenge, let alone crossing into a neighboring state and connecting with multiple transportation providers there. According to Farr, rabbittransit was able to overcome these barriers through the leadership and direction of a forward-thinking board of directors.

“Our board has made it part of our strategic plan to be as regional as possible,” says Farr. “Mobility doesn’t end at the border, and our board has been visionary in recognizing that fundamental reality and improving the quality of life in our region.”

The virtues that allowed rabbitEXPRESS to again expand its offerings of connected travel options in the region. In the spring of 2011, the 15N route was initiated, connecting Harrisburg with Gettysburg. Bypassing York altogether, 15N buses begin their trips at the same railroad depot where President Lincoln arrived to deliver the Gettysburg Address, then head northeast on Route 15 to serve the same destinations in Harrisburg.
as the 83N line. Four roundtrips are offered on weekdays, two each in the morning and evening commuting periods. Meanwhile, rabbittransit recently completed a merger with the Adams County Transit Authority – Gettysburg is located in Adams County – to become a single, regional transit provider, using the rabbittransit brand. The move allows riders in both counties access to a unified route network, a single fare structure and improved connections between routes, while improving efficiency and reliability through integrated administration, maintenance and procurement. The unified agency is already at work in preparation for the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, and how the system can move many more than four score visitors expected to take part in events and reenactments.

“York is ideally suited to be a regional hub for connectivity,” says Farr. “We’re a bedroom community where we export more commuters than we bring back, but it’s a convenient area for people to live and maintain a high quality of life.”

**The End of the Beginning**

With its growing set of regional bus routes connecting several transit systems and two passenger rail options in two states, rabbittransit and its EXPRESS commuter routes have established an exciting new concept for how a transit system can proactively engage a larger region with new and expanded service. The agency is already heavily involved in southern Pennsylvania’s extensive carpool and vanpool program, and is considering new rabbitEXPRESS routes to Lancaster, Pa. and Frederick, Md. – both of which would link with local bus service as well as Amtrak intercity trains in Lancaster and MARC commuter rail service from Frederick to Washington, D.C.

For other transit systems seeking to regionalize their networks, Farr suggests cultivating strong relationships with nearby transportation providers to develop true connectivity and preparing to serve non-traditional transit riders through communications and outreach while still not losing focus on the needs of core passengers loyal to the existing transit options. In all, though, it’s a highly exciting and rewarding process, according to Farr.

“Everybody’s trip starts at the front door, and it’s our job to be an attractive option from there,” says Farr. “Becoming that attractive option means thinking and acting towards true connectivity, and a never-ending process to refine and improve how we help people connect with each other and where they need to go.” CT