

New Jersey Transit: A Transit System Supporting Innovative Transit

by Rich Sampson

In New Jersey, the transit agency that serves much of the state also serves as the state's transit administrative body. New Jersey Transit operates all types of vehicles and services throughout the state, and also works for the betterment of local transit providers through a series of innovative programs designed to improve and augment public and community transportation service. It's an unusual role, but one that NJ Transit tackles with success.

As its state's public transportation corporation, New Jersey Transit (NJ Transit) fills a unique dual role in orchestrating public transit all around the Garden State. At the same time, it provides transit services directly to communities across the state, while also supporting and administering investment in local transit systems. At first glance, this bi-directional mission might imply two aspects at odds, but rather the inverse is true: NJ Transit's identity as both a statewide governmental body and a transit provider allow the agency to best serve the needs of transit passengers.

In its role as the statewide transit provider, NJ Transit's service area covers more than 5,000 square miles. Every day, it operates more than 2,000 buses, 700 commuter rail trains and 45 light rail vehicles, carrying nearly 223 million riders each year. This makes NJ Transit the nation's third largest transit system. And while the system's service territory spans the entire state – from the Catskill Mountains at the New York State border to the Philadelphia suburbs, and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Susquehanna River – two of its busiest passenger terminals aren't even in New Jersey, as it operates routes to downtown New York and Philadelphia.

As much as NJ Transit is



defined by the massive amount of service it provides on a daily basis, it exerts a similar degree of effort in supporting the local transit networks that provide more targeted mobility options in New Jersey's cities and townships. Directing this work is NJ Transit's Local Programs and Minibus Support Unit, the agency's department charged with not only distributing federal and state investment to these systems, but also working directly with local operators to provide the best service possible.

In communities where NJ Transit's buses and trains don't provide direct service, the agency coordinates with local governments, organizations and community groups to ensure that transit needs are met. This

effort includes distributing resources from the U.S. Department of Transportation's 5310 and 5311 programs, which support service for older adults and people with disabilities, and to rural areas, respectively. Moreover, the state of New Jersey leverages this investment by dedicating 7.5 percent of the state's Casino Tax Fund to support these systems each year. The state first dedicated this funding stream to support local transit programs in 2003, and according to NJ Transit leaders, access to a guaranteed and predictable source of investment is a significant asset.

"Our state's commitment to supporting local systems makes life easier for everyone," explains NJ

NJ Transit operates local and intercity fixed-route buses, along with commuter and light rail trains across the state.



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-Rich Pinho, CCTM

Ocean County Department of Transportation

Transit’s Bob Koska, Director of the Local Programs and Minibus Support Unit. “Because it’s a steady stream of funds, we can let our providers know exactly how much they can expect from the state, and it allows for responsible budgeting decisions when matched with the federal funding programs.”

Through the combined resources of federal and local dollars, New Jersey’s local transit operations can support capital expenses – such as new vehicles and facilities, sustain their operating budget and cover administrative expenses. But NJ Transit’s participation in this process is not limited to a pass-through agent for governmental funds; instead, the agency works with its counterparts at the local level to ensure that transportation planning efforts can occur, arranges frequent and evolving training opportunities for all levels of transit professionals, and coordinates vehicle purchases across the state to offer the best deals on the latest technology. In all, the Local Programs Unit supports more than 60 local systems operating more than 580 vehicles.

It is in these areas where NJ Transit’s experience and perspective as a transit provider become even more essential. Instead of a distant observer conducting affairs from the state bureaucracy, NJ Transit has first-hand institutional knowledge of the challenges transit operators face on a daily basis and the long-term issues that inform decision-making for transportation providers. The agency believes this foundation of their identity has built lasting relationships with its local systems.

“Being a transit provider ourselves, we’ve experienced a good sense of solidarity with the local providers we work with,” says Koska. “It’s easier to find common ground on a personal level when transit leaders know you’ve faced the same hurdles they have.”

Local systems around New Jersey agree, noting that the guidance and feedback they receive from NJ Transit

is grounded in solid transit principles.

“We have a great relationship with NJ Transit and their local programs office,” says Rich Pinho, CCTM, Director of Vehicle Services at the Ocean County Department of Transportation. “Between vehicle procurement, training sessions and many other areas, they’re very helpful, and it’s because they know what they’re talking about.”

“It’s an enormous comfort doing our work, knowing the resources the state and NJ Transit have committed to supporting systems like ours,” says Betty Chamberlain, CCTM, of Passaic County Paratransit.

Beyond the support NJ Transit offers on the daily administration of local systems, it also assists these operators in coordinating their services with those provided directly by the agency. This assistance is achieved primarily through NJ Transit’s Community Shuttle program. The agency offers 20-passenger vehicles at no cost to communities in order to link their riders to NJ Transit bus, light-rail or commuter-rail routes during peak service hours. The program allows these communities to be responsive to their evolving travel needs. Moreover, it also provides partial support for the operating costs for these vehicles, which can also be used for any purpose when not delivering riders to NJ Transit lines. For the agency, the Community Shuttle program is a crucial element in linking its roles as transit operator and an administrative unit.

“We don’t want our local systems to be isolated from our statewide transit operations,” says Koska. “They needn’t be on an island, and the Community Shuttle program is just one way we try to achieve that.”



Local transit systems in New Jersey work with the Local Programs Support Unit of NJ Transit to receive vehicles, training and planning support.

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