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Voices from the Community

In this edition of DigitalCT, The CT Podcast page features two important conversations. To subscribe to the CT Podcast, go to http://ctpodcast.blogspot.com or search "The CT Podcast" in iTunes. Click on the microphone beside each entry to listen!

Ron Baumgart, Executive Director, River Cities Public Transit, Pierre, South Dakota
Ron Baumgart was named the 2013 Community Transportation Manager of the Year at the CTAA EXPO last month in Albuquerque. Ron shares his perspective on effective transit management in this multi-faceted podcast discussion. From looking at his agency's service through the eyes of a customer to surrounding himself with the best staff possible, Ron offers his transit management insights here.

Ted Ward, 2013 National Community Transportation Driver of the Year
Last month in Albuquerque, NM, Ted Ward — an operator under contract with MV Transportation at Austin’s Capital Metro — won the body-on-chassis bus division at the 2013 National Community Transportation Roadeo and was named the Otis Reed Jr. Driver of the Year. Ward has been driving in Austin for more than two decades, focusing on serving people with disabilities. “My job is a joy,” he says. He joins the CT Podcast to discuss his work, the roadeo and more.

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EXPO 2013 Recap

EXPO 2013 was held June 2 – 7 in Albuquerque, N.M. More than 1,200 attendees participated in the week-long event. Here are some of the images and award winners from another fantastic EXPO!

Urban Community Transportation System of the Year: Meadowlink, Wood-Ridge, New Jersey

Rural Community Transportation System of the Year: Southern Nevada Transit Coalition-Silver Rider, Laughlin, Nevada

Community Transportation Manager of the Year: Ron Baumgart, River Cities Transportation, Pierre, South Dakota

State Agency/Association of the Year: New Mexico Department of Transportation Rail and Transit Division

Dr. and Mrs. William and Budd Bell Award: United We Ride Ambassadors

Dr. Aaron Henry Leadership Award: Children’s Health Fund, New York City

George Rucker Memorial Award: National Tribal Transit Association

Founder’s Award: Patricia Weaver, Lawrence, Kansas

The combination of sun, clouds and smoke from nearby wildfires presented a surreal scene over the Santa Fe Valley (above) as captured by the lens of DigitalCT Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren. FTA Administrator Peter Rogoff again spoke to EXPO attendees (below).
EXPO 2013 Recap

2013 National Community Transportation Roadeo Award Winners

Otis Reed, Jr. Driver of the Year: Ted Ward, MV Transportation, Austin Texas

BOC Winner: Ted Ward, MV Transportation, Austin Texas

Van Winner: Raymond Aylmer, Gulf County ARC & Transportation, Port St. Joe Fla.

Mini Van Winner: Josemaria Mendoza, Access Services, El Monte Calif.

Rookie of the Year: Robert Howard, Spokane Transit Authority, Spokane Wash.

Top left: BOC Course Captain Gary Schiavone leads the BOC drivers in a walk-through of the course during the National Community Transportation Roadeo; above: Otis Reed Jr. Driver of the Year winner Ted Ward was featured on a bus wrap on a Capital Metro vehicle in Austin commemorating his championship; bottom left: Lt. General Russel Honore delivered an address to an EXPO General Session on the importance of emergency preparedness.
The perfect compliment to Digital CT is our bi-weekly E-Newsletter, CT Fast Mail. Delivering the latest news on transit policy from the nation’s capitol, developments from across the country, research and analysis publications and information on resources and technical assistance from the Community Transportation Association and other partners, CT Fast Mail is the most direct location for the most relevant news and updates in the industry.

And it’s free to sign-up! Simply send an email to fastmail@ctaa.org and you’ll be connected with the next issue of CT Fast Mail. In the meantime, view the latest edition at www.ctaa.org.
The full sweep of Minnesota and its many community and public transit providers is not doable in a single week. There are just too many — more than 70 in total — and the state’s too big. Our goal was to visit as many as possible in four-and-a-half days, attempting to find some representative sample that highlights the state’s transit successes, innovations and uniqueness. We believe that in the pages that follow, we satisfied these objectives.

Our transit tour of Minnesota gave us an appreciation of the understated, humble manner with which so many transit managers, drivers, dispatchers and all the other staff members so ably serve their communities. From the booming transit focal point that is the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul to thriving small-urban operators in places like St. Cloud and Duluth; from expansive regional rural operators like Arrowhead Transit to small town operators in places like Bemidji, Hibbing, Roseau and St. Peter, we found a collection of noteworthy, customer-oriented mobility systems meeting local needs with efficient, appropriate transit services. We found unexpected longevity and a community and public transportation network that is earning its own way. Each system was unique, yet all shared a value system — a culture of service — that when taken collectively, consisted of nothing more than neighbors helping neighbors.

**About Minnesota**

Minnesota’s transportation history originated with its lakes and waterways. The name, Minnesota, is derived from a Lakota phrase meaning, sky-tinted waters. The state’s nickname, *Land of 10,000 Lakes*, actually undercounts the number of lakes of at least 10 acres in size by nearly 2,000. At the state’s northeastern corner, North America’s largest lake — Lake Superior — reaches its rugged western coastline. In north-central Minnesota, Lake Itasca is the headwaters of the mighty Mississippi River, launching it on its 2,500-mile run to the Gulf of Mexico.

In the state’s North Country, it is said the smaller lakes were formed by the footprints of the legendary woodsman Paul Bunyan and his blue ox Babe as they traversed the state — the bigger lakes, like Superior, were formed where Paul and Babe laid down to rest. A leak in the water wagon that Babe pulled around the north woods formed the Mississippi River.

The state features three distinct regions: grassy prairie in the southern half, dense woods in the upper half and the famed Iron Range in the northeast section. The 12th largest state, a trip from the southern to northern ends of the state will likely cover more than 400 miles. In the span of our Minnesota transit tour, we covered nearly 1,000 miles. In this expanse, the power of Mother Nature, too, became evident.

In the tour, each community we visited seemed to have its own unique weather-related disaster story. For some it was floods, inundating cities and towns; others recalled the exact date and time of a tornado’s wrath. Raging fires and epic snow storms also bore mentioning on our travels.

**Common Themes**

Though we tried not to compare the systems we visited in the transit tour, several recurring themes emerged that characterize transit in Minnesota. The tour revealed common transit themes of service continuity, increasing ridership, technological development and, most of all, a focus on the transit customer. Training was vital to each of the systems we visited, in terms of safety and efficiency. Nearly every operation boasted of its commitment to state and local rodeo competitions.

We asked some common questions on the
tour, and — frankly — received back common answers. Each system’s leadership almost immediately pointed to the employees at the agency as the reason for its success. Drivers and dispatchers stood out in this regard, for both knowing exactly who the customers are, and for the professionalism and dedication they exhibit every day on the job.

For the first time in any state transit tour, we came across several transit systems whose history was collected in the form of meticulous scrapbooks. In today’s digital, social media world, these system scrapbooks served as a reminder of simpler times and it was revealing to see transit managers pause, look at an aging newspaper article and smile. The scrap book also highlighted the length of time agencies had served the people of their community.

The Minnesota DOT, too, came in for regular compliments across the various stops on the tour, with an emphasis on the training, technical assistance and steady, guiding hand that its staff members provide to community and public transit agencies across the state.

All that said, the theme that most strongly emerged in the visits we made was one of common-sense, steady, thoughtful and earnest leadership. The transit managers, advocates and officials we had the privilege of meeting and speaking with were, without a doubt, people skilled in the practical art of getting things done. People in the community need the rides and they’re making sure the trips happen.

Next June 8 – 13, the Community Transportation EXPO comes to St. Paul, Minn. After spending a week in Minnesota, we’re already anticipating a great conference! CT

The headwaters of the Mississippi River (below) originate in Lake Itasca near Bemidji, one of Minnesota’s signature natural destinations that ultimately underscores the state’s vital role in the national transportation network.
Led by a Bus Guy:
Minnesota Transportation Commissioner Charlie Zelle

By Scott Bogren

The Minnesota Department of Transportation headquarters building sits just across the street from the state capital, up on a hill overlooking downtown St. Paul. On a searingly hot day, the DigitalCT Magazine staff launched the Minnesota transit tour with a visit and warm welcome from our old friend and recently-appointed Minnesota DOT Commissioner Charlie Zelle.

Zelle (pronounced Zell-E) is likely familiar to community and public transportation leaders and advocates for his more than two decades with Jefferson Lines, an intercity bus company with routes in 13 states and whose operations often coordinate with local transit operations. In 2009 at the Community Transportation EXPO in Providence, R.I., he won the George Rucker Award for his leadership in crafting public-private partnerships that improved transportation for thousands of Americans everyday. Under Zelle’s leadership Jefferson Lines was — and continues to be — a leading intercity transportation partner with community and public transit operators through shared stations, through ticketing and more.

“Where some in the intercity bus industry saw transit as competition, Charlie saw potential partners,” says CTAA Executive Director Dale J. Marsico, CCTM. “To have that type of inspired leadership heading up an entire DOT, Minnesota and its citizens are certainly fortunate.”

Zelle was appointed Minnesota DOT Commissioner by Governor Mark Dayton last December, and officially started in his new capacity in January. His goals in the relatively new job are clear.

“Our vision is a world-class transportation system that supports our world-class state,” says Zelle. “Our work is not about concrete, bridges and transit — it’s about the citizens of Minnesota and the economy.”

These are not the statements of a professional politician. Zelle means every word of what he says. Born and raised in St. Paul, and having spent a career in the transportation field, Zelle understands the true impact of a fully integrated, multimodal transportation program, and wants to do right by his fellow Minnesotans.

“In some ways it’s pretty simple,” says Zelle. “We have customers and we’re looking to serve them better.”

In the DigitalCT staff’s subsequent tour of transit operations across the Land of 10,000 Lakes, one universal, consistent truth we heard was when we mentioned the new Transportation Commissioner: “He’s a bus guy!”

An Elevator Leads to Opportunity

As is often the case in life, timing is everything. Last fall, Zelle found himself on an elevator ride with an aide to Governor Dayton at the end of which, it was suggested that he consider taking on the position of state transportation commissioner. Zelle pauses and smiles at the memory.

“When I got home, I told my wife about

DigitalCT Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren and Commissioner Zelle.
it and when she could tell I was seriously considering it, she said: ‘You’re really thinking about this aren’t you?’ It wasn’t an easy decision, but it was such a great opportunity and I knew that Governor Dayton really understands the value of transportation,” says Zelle. Previously, Zelle had served on the Governor’s transportation finance advisory committee, which made its recommendations last December.

**Adding a Private-Sector Perspective**

From his modest, fourth floor corner office, Zelle is quick to acknowledge the strong technical and engineering skills that the Minnesota DOT possesses.

“This organization has a strong technical culture,” says Zelle. “I’m here to add a strategic, bottom-line orientation to that culture.”

A big part of this effort, according to Zelle, will be ridding the agency of its silos and beginning to stitch together the various skills and capacities of the DOT to truly harness its potential.

“We don’t live in a siloed world anymore,” says Zelle. “Our goals are focused on integrated transportation that improves passenger mobility — regardless of the mode — and citizens’ quality of life.”

Zelle can look out his window and see some of the DOT’s investments, and thus its goals, in action.

“Take University Avenue for example,” says Zelle. “We have several billion dollars in construction invested there. Or look at the Southwest Corridor light-rail project: It’s the poster child of the connection between transportation and jobs here in the Twin Cities.”

Zelle and his staff focus on transit and transportation projects around the state, looking for strategic, high-return investments. The biggest value he sees in improving all forms of transportation in Minnesota is its connection to enticing employers to locate in the state.

“Businesses in our state and those with the potential of moving to Minnesota are increasingly looking at connectivity for their workforce,” says Zelle. “We routinely hear that the top two factors are the quality of the workforce and the ease of the transportation situation.”

**Taking a Generational Look**

Minnesota is a state that has invested in its community and public transit systems, beginning with dedicated funding going back as far as 1977 and, more recently, with a motor vehicles sales tax dedicated to transit in the early 1990s.

Across the state, ridership is on the rise and the state itself covered more than 51 percent of transit system operating costs in 2011. For Fiscal Years 2012 and 2013 — Minnesota operates on a biennial budget — the state legislature appropriated a total of $108 million in general funds and $480 million in motor vehicle sales revenues to support transit. The commitment is evident throughout the state.

“We’re involved right now in a generational look at transportation across Minnesota,” says Zelle. “Transit is a key component in this and I’m thrilled to be a part of it.”

**Vital Stats**

**Organization:** Minnesota DOT  
**Commissioner:** Charlie Zelle  
**Founded:** 1976  
**Website:** [dot.state.mn.us](http://www.dot.state.mn.us)
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The Twin Cities’ Transit Awakening: Momentum Surging for New Mobility Options

By Rich Sampson

There is a moment in the lifespan of some American metropolises when transit becomes not just something the city has – a service or infrastructure like any other – but instead transforms into something they are known for, a part of their identity. Think of New York City and Boston in the early 20th century. How about the opening of the Washington Metro or Bay Area Rapid Transit in the 1970s? Or Portland in the mid-1990s or Los Angeles under recently mayor Antonio Villaragosa. For the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, that moment of transit awakening is now.

Few other communities of similar size currently find themselves at that exciting yet challenging point where momentum and resources come together to fundamentally reshape mobility trends and habits. A score of new transit projects – from commuter and light rail to bus rapid transit, exclusive bus-only shoulder lanes and park-and-ride locations – are all either recently-completed or moving rapidly through planning and construction. In all, it amounts to nothing short of a new beginning for public transit options in Minnesota’s most-populated region.

A New Twist on An Old Tale

The plot summary of the history of transit in the Twin Cities is a familiar read to most observers of urban development during the past century: the first horse-drawn streetcars emerged in the late 1800s operated by private entities, followed by conversion to electric traction not long after and ultimately replaced by diesel buses between 1940 and 1970 before finally shifting to public authorities. Such was the case in Minneapolis and St. Paul, whose streetcar networks once rivaled the fabled Pacific Electric Red Car network in Southern California. Of course, the area’s public bus routes provided crucial service to those who needed it most, bringing
people to and from work, medical appointments, community services and more.

The moment when the storyline shifts, though, came in 1967, when the Minnesota Legislature created the Metropolitan Council, whose initial raison d’etre was to end contamination of the area’s water network – a job too large for a single jurisdiction. Indeed, at the time of the Council’s creation, more than 200 municipal agencies and departments existing in the seven-county metropolitan area. Once such trans-jurisdictional service that became the domain of the Council was the region’s transit network. In just its first five years of operation, the Council’s transit division – today known as Metro Transit – replaced a total of 465 buses to provide reliable service.

After ensuring dependable bus routes would continue, the agency began to consider higher-capacity, transformational transit projects to reflect the changing demographics of the Twin Cities region, an inherently methodical process. Plans for a rail transit system first emerged as early as 1972, but it wasn’t until the opening of the Hiawatha light-rail line in 2004 that a full-fledged transit vision for the region evolved in earnest. The 12.3-mile Hiawatha line – connecting downtown Minneapolis to Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (MSP) and the Mall of America in Bloomington – represented an attitudinal shift in how the Twin Cities viewed transit’s role in the area’s future.

“The success of the Hiawatha line started to bring the region together on transit,” adds John Siqveland, Public Relations Manager for Metro Transit, noting the route – recently rebranded as the METRO Blue Line – draws more than 31,000 daily riders, the busiest transit line in Minnesota. “Now the transit system is increasingly viewed as a solution to development, land use and affordable travel.”

Service First, Regardless of Mode

Even though the Blue Line light rail marked a new level of awareness of transit’s potential in the Twin Cities, rail lines were

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**Vital Stats**

- **Organization:** Metro Transit
- **General Manager:** Brian Lamb
- **Founded:** 1967
- **Annual Ridership:** 81 million
- **Number of Vehicles:** 937
- **Website:** www.metrotransit.org

**In Their Own Words**

Watch Metro Transit’s John Siqveland describes the system’s focus on outstanding customer service.

See the Twin Cities’ daily transit rush hour in action in this video by DigitalCT staff shot at downtown Minneapolis’ bustling Target Field transfer station.
never envisioned as the only means of leveraging a greater presence of public transportation in the region. Alongside the **METRO Green Line** light-rail route – currently under construction between the existing Blue Line in downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul and set to open next summer – and a handful of other light-rail and commuter rail lines in various stages of planning, Metro Transit fields an aggressive approach to local and regional bus routes.

The system’s **123 bus routes** serve more than 100 **park-and-ride facilities** through its service area and have access to more than 300 miles of bus-only shoulder lanes on highways and thoroughfares, the largest such program of its kind in the nation. The bus-only shoulder lanes program began in 1991 and includes extensive awareness training for drivers to avoid incursions with distressed vehicles and navigating the narrow shoulder lanes, all while reducing travel times and boosting reliability of numerous bus routes by avoiding traffic congestion. Metro Transit also stresses its **Hi-Frequency Network**, a collection of 12 routes that operate at least every 15 minutes from 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on weekdays and from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Saturdays.

Elsewhere, the network’s innovative “**Marq2**” corridor on Marquette and 2nd avenues accommodates 80 percent of Metro Transit’s express buses with vehicles alternating stops every other block to move transit traffic through the dedicated lanes during rush hours. The Marq2 corridor – not quite Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) which was completed in 2009 – included rebuilt streets to accommodate the greater volume of buses, new heated and lit bus shelters, real-time passenger information, wider sidewalks, bike racks, trees and public art. Both streets are

(continued on page 17)
Metro Transit’s ever-expanding network of light-rail, bus rapid transit and commuter rail lines includes seven routes either in service, under construction or in advanced planning (left). A longer-term vision for the region includes additional routes focused around The Interchange in Minneapolis and St. Paul’s Union Depot as the focal points of transit in the Twin Cities region.
located within a block of Blue Line light-rail stations.

Moreover, the METRO Red Line – the region’s first true BRT route – opened for service on June 22. The 16-mile corridor connects passengers from Blue Line trains at the Mall of America station with Lakeville through five total stations. Using dedicated lanes on Minnesota State Highway 77, the line includes signal priority, permanent platform stations and all-doors boarding, among other amenities. Also in development is the METRO Orange Line BRT along Interstate 35W, which will connect downtown Minneapolis with Bloomington and Burnsville. For Metro Transit, the route’s color designates its high-capacity transit status alongside the Blue and Green light-rail lines, further proof of the system’s commitment to innovative bus transit.

Metro Transit also offers an advanced, uni-

fied payment mechanism called the Go-To Card, which allows riders to use a single card to access the entire network, ranging from Northstar commuter rail to neighborhood bus routes. Northstar riders, in particular, benefit from easy-to-use payment lanes at Target Field station in downtown Minneapolis designated by their ultimate destination, an approach unique among commuter rail systems. Since its introduction in 2007, use of Go-To Card has risen to more than 50 percent of Metro Transit passengers and includes special configurations for both older and younger riders, as well as targeted platforms for employers, schools and non-profits. Go-To Card users can also enroll in an auto-refill program that refreshes the card’s balance when it gets too low.

“We find that new ways of incorporating both bus and rail modes are the best way to serve our customers,” explains Siqveland.

“We look for long-term approaches that respond to community needs while providing the highest level of service possible.”

“It’s not just for the build-out of projects that we have a good reputation, but our focus on customers, technology and environmental improvement is what has earned us trust in the region,” says Lamb.

Union Depot & The Interchange: The Twin Beacons of Transit

It seems fitting that for a region known as the Twin Cities, there should be two complimentary landmarks for mobility. In downtown St. Paul, the historic 1917 Union Depot recently completed an extensive restoration, paving way for renewed transportation activity at a facility that once hosted more than 280 daily trains on 18 tracks and 9 platforms. Today, five Metro Transit bus routes serve the Depot, with another three
Transit in the Twin Cities

operated by the Minnesota Valley Transit Authority and intercity bus service provided by Jefferson Lines. Amtrak is expected to return its *Empire Builder* trains between Chicago and Seattle or Portland by October 2013, after passenger rail service was shifted to the less-accessible Midway Station in 1978.

Additionally, the METRO Green Line light rail route will call the Depot its eastern terminus upon its opening next summer, while additional light-rail or commuter rail lines on the Red Rock and Gateway corridors could also serve the station in the future. Plans for potential intercity and high-speed rail lines reaching as far as Duluth, Rochester and Chicago also include service to the Union Depot.

While the revitalized historic nature of Union Depot corresponds well to the industrial past of St. Paul, its counterpart in downtown Minneapolis – *The Interchange* – will strike a modern tone. Now under construction adjacent to the Target Field station that serves as the current terminus for both the Blue Line and Northstar commuter rail to Big Lake, The Interchange will not only help channel passengers to rail and bus transit routes more conveniently, but also serve as a community gathering place for downtown Minneapolis and fuel development in the nearby North Loop and Warehouse District neighborhoods. The forthcoming Green Line light rail line will connect both the Union Depot and The Interchange as its endpoints. Among the project’s innovative design elements are The Great Lawn green space, The Cascade outdoor amphitheatre and recreation plaza and other open public areas. The Interchange also fosters future extensions of the Blue Line on the Bottineau corridor to Osseo and the Green Line through the Southwest corridor to Eden Prairie, as well as potential intercity rail service to Duluth via the proposed Northern Lights Express (for more, see page 24 - ed).

“The combination of the Union Depot in St. Paul and The Interchange in Minneapolis represent very strong, tangible presences for transit,” says Siqveland. “They will offer fantastic regional connectivity and set the stage for future high-capacity routes going forward.”

**Hallmarks of a New Transit Era**

Interacting in-person with the various elements of transit in the Twin Cities – whether they be existing or in development – there’s no avoiding the perceptible momentum growing for mobility in the region. More than 81 million passengers ride the system each year, and ridership grew by more than 165,000 additional riders in 2012 alone. New bus and rail services and infrastructure projects seem to move quicker now, and riders transferring between complementary modes deliver energy befitting a region eagerly embracing its future.

“We have a very robust vision for transit improvements, but need a reliable, dedicated

Metro Transit's John Siqveland and DigitalCT Editor Rich Sampson explore The Interchange construction site (above) in downtown Minneapolis.

The Interchange (above) features a modern design that will serve as the focal point for transit in Minneapolis, including *The Great Lawn* outdoor public space (below).
funding source,” says Lamb. “We have made great progress with Governor Dayton and the current Legislature. Individual projects are good, but we aim to implement a larger vision for the next 10 to 15 years.”

This sense of transit was best exemplified during our ride on a Metro Transit bus from the St. Paul Union Depot on a typical weekday rush hour. Our driver – courteous and engaging with us as a couple of out-of-town visitors asking about fares and the most convenient stop to disembark – knew most of her riders personally, pointing out the various connections and transfers available to the rest of the region, places she enjoyed going herself.

“There’s a lot happening here now with transit,” she said. “It’s exciting to be a part of and I can’t wait to see what’s coming next.”

CT

CTAA’s Small Urban Network is forming right now! If you represent a transit operation in a small-urban community, please contact Scott Bogren at bogren@ctaa.org and be sure to get on our SUN mailing list. The first full meeting of the SUN will take place on September 5. Stay tuned to the CTAA FastMail for the lastest details.
Community Transportation

EXPO 2014

St. Paul, MN
June 8 – 13, 2014

Mark Your Calendars Today!
While passenger trains in the context of light rail and commuter rail in the Twin Cities region indeed appears to be on solid footing, intercity rail in the larger state is less a sure thing. Currently, Amtrak’s daily – and often-delayed – Empire Builder between Chicago and Seattle or Portland is the only scheduled intercity rail service in Minnesota. Although the Empire Builder has some of the highest customer service ratings in the entire Amtrak network, it arrives at Midway Station – appropriately named for its location in-between Saint Paul and Minneapolis, but hardly convenient for most of the region’s population – on its westbound trek late at night, not particularly ideal for regular, reliable travel. Moreover, the train pauses for about 45 minutes in each direction to refuel and change crews, adding to travel times.

And yet, there are several encouraging projects that could transform Minnesota’s ability to connect communities via passenger trains. In particular, the Zip Rail corridor – between the Twin Cities and Rochester – and the Northern Lights Express, which would link Minneapolis-St Paul with Duluth are about at similar stages of development and could connect the bulk of the state’s population via frequent and reliable passenger rail service.

**Zip Rail**

Despite its status as the largest metropolitan area in Minnesota outside the Twin Cities region with more than 200,000 residents, the Rochester, Minn., area’s economic future depends on improved transportation connections along the roughly 90-mile route to Minneapolis-St Paul. Currently, no direct rail lines connect the two regions and although the state’s Highway 52 doesn’t yet experience great congestion, it is not built to Interstate Highway levels, such limited-access, grade-separated, etc. The populations of both regions are expected to grow over coming decades, requiring improved mobility connections between them, especially as Rochester’s nationally-known medical services industry continues to expand and new employment opportunities enhance both areas.

Accordingly, Zip Rail – a coordinated effort of the Olmstead County Regional Rail Authority, the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration – is studying how best to institute
Intercity Passenger Rail

high-capacity rail service within the corridor. The state has identified the route as a Priority 1 corridor, placing it at the front of the list for state support and investment.

Current studies have focused on high-speed rail service – at speeds between 150 and 220 miles per hour – utilizing dedicated infrastructure and vehicles as the best fit for the corridor to compete with auto and air travel, while also potentially serving as the first phase of a larger high-speed rail network connecting other Midwestern destinations such as Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison and Des Moines. State transportation officials have long identified a high-speed rail link to Chicago as one of their top long-term goals, but leaders in neighboring Iowa and Wisconsin have been hesitant – at best, and reticent at worst – to expand intercity passenger rail options in their states.

In the meantime, Minnesota could initiate high-speed rail service between the Twin Cities and Rochester – serving intrastate traffic initially – while waiting for Iowa and Wisconsin to become more comfortable with similar projects, or alternatively work with Illinois – one of the most passenger-rail friendly states in the nation – to advance the Twin Cities – Chicago corridor without the involvement of Iowa and Wisconsin, even though such a service would have to travel through at least one of those states.

As it stands today, Minnesota recently conducted a series of public meetings along the Zip Rail route in advance of the Tier I Environmental Impact Study (EIS) – a prerequisite for any large infrastructure project to move forward. A service development plan is also expected to be completed in conjunction with the EIS by the end of 2014.

Northern Lights Express

Seeking to link the Twin Cities with Minnesota’s third-largest metropolitan area is the 155-mile Northern Lights Express service. While the project would likely use conventional rail equipment rather than high-speed rail infrastructure as proposed for Zip Rail, the operation will still focus on frequent trips and 110-mph service to spur $2 billion in development and encourage more than 13,000 jobs along the corridor.

The project – a Joint Powers Board with participation from six counties, numerous cities and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe – began in 2007 and is currently undertaking engineering and design work supported by federal and state investment that is expected to be completed in 2015. Trains on the corridor would utilize existing BNSF Railway tracks between Duluth and The Interchange intermodal facility currently under construction in downtown Minneapolis, along with three additional on-line stations in Hinckley, Cambridge and Coon Rapids.

Moving Minnesota...By Rail

With two intercity rail projects progressing through the planning and engineering process, Minnesota is moving towards a more robust network of intra-state passenger rail corridors to compliment the growing rail transit options in the Twin Cities. When matched with signature intermodal facilities in Duluth, Minneapolis and St. Paul, Zip Rail and the Northern Lights Express could produce one of the nation’s most dynamic passenger rail environments in coming years.

CT
St. Peter Transit

Quintessential Rural Transit

By Scott Bogren

With a well-maintained downtown dotted with buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, a thriving private college — Gustavus Adolphus — perched on its western edge and a host of parks and recreation areas throughout its six square miles, St. Peter is a jewel of a small town located in south-central Minnesota in the heart of the Minnesota River Valley.

Home to 11,000 people, St. Peter has a unique history. For a brief spell in the mid-1800s, the town nearly became the Minnesota Territorial Capital, displacing St. Paul. A bill doing just that passed both houses of the territorial legislature and but for it being kept away from the Governor for signature until the session ended, who knows what St. Peter might look like today. Many locals can point to the place, on the city’s south side, where the state capital might well have stood.

Of course, what brought the DigitalCT team to the area was St. Peter Transit, a 25-year old system serving the community with a growing rural operation that impeccably suits the community. Today’s St. Peter Transit began in the late 1980s when the local taxi operator went out of business and the city applied for grant funds to replace it with a dial-a-ride transit operation — using the same phone number as the taxi company, a number still in use today.

“Honestly, we don’t like to think of ourselves as doing anything special,” says Paula O’Connell, who up until very recently served as both the city’s finance director as well as interim transit director. “Our goal is for the citizens of St. Peter to have the most accessible and comfortable transportation available to them.”

Growth and Efficiency

Approaching St. Peter from the north, along the Minnesota River Valley, one traverses some of Minnesota’s most verdant agricul-
tural land. A dozen miles to the north lies Le Sueur, birthplace to both Le Sueur peas and the Green Giant company. Torrential rains in the days leading up to the DigitalCT staff visit to St. Peter Transit led to flooding in the area and a number of resulting road closures.

St. Peter Transit is run out of the city's administrative building, situated between US 169 — St. Peter's main street — and the Minnesota River. A single story structure that's home to a number of city agencies, St. Peter Transit's spare bus parked outside is our hint that we've found the right place.

We meet in a small, window-less conference room that seems to double as a library with O'Connell; Wayne Albers, the newly appointed transit director; Juwan Onadipe, an intern with the system; and with Jan Klassen from the Minnesota DOT. The pride that all these local transportation leaders take in St. Peter Transit is immediately evident.

“This is a system that's found its niche in the community,” explains Albers. “My job is to keep things moving along.”

Operating two body-on-chassis buses in dial-a-ride operation six days a week, St. Peter Transit provided nearly 75,000 trips in 2011. Base fare for a trip is $1.75. Of the 13 transit operators that the Minnesota DOT classified in 2011 as small urban, St. Peter Transit ranked third in both cost per ride ($4.07) and passengers per hour (13.2). Ridership on the system is growing, up 55 percent in the past five years. The system serves both St. Peter and the small town of Kasota (pop. 680) to the south.

“We serve the general public,” says O'Connell, “with a concentration on seniors, people with disabilities, adult education and congregate meal trips. We also have some pre-school program service during the school year.” St. Peter serves Gustavus Adolphus College with free trips for all students with a valid student ID.

“Our college trips are a growing component of our service,” says O'Connell.

The funding mix for St. Peter Transit includes federal Section 5311 rural public funds administered through the Minnesota DOT, state transit funding and local support through the city council.

“We have a great group of partners,” says O'Connell.

Changes in the Offing

No sooner did the DigitalCT Magazine staff begin working on the Minnesota edition of the magazine than St. Peter Transit announced that beginning Aug. 1, the system will transition one of its two buses in dial-a-ride service to fixed-route operations. A major change.

“The goal is with the route picking up more riders, the dial-a-ride will be more available,” says O'Connell in a St. Peter Herald article.

The route will be divided into two — north
and south — loops, each taking 30 minutes to traverse. A local grocery store will serve as the hub as it lies in the middle of the two loops. The goal, according to Albers, is reducing wait times for St. Peter Transit passengers.

“Each stop is going to be consistently on the hour,” said Albers to the local newspaper. “The times we have listed are when the bus leaves. If they arrive early, they’ll sit and wait until it’s time to go.”

The system’s growing ridership necessitated this important change in operational approach. Albers hopes the new route will reduce mileage on the city’s buses and help increase revenue.

**Taking a Trip**

To facilitate our taking a quick ride on St. Peter Transit to get a better feel for both the operation and the local community, Albers calls ahead to driver Todd Fisher, who soon swings by the city administration building with a passenger and a driver trainee, Mike Wenisch aboard.

That’s how many of St. Peter Transit’s rides begin: with a call into the driver. As ridership has grown in recent years, it is precisely this volume of calls that led the system’s leaders to launch the upcoming fixed-route.

“Often times our passengers don’t even have to say who they are or where they’re going,” says O’Connell. “The drivers already know, just by hearing the voice.”

Indeed, as we’re driving a call comes into Fisher, who pulls over and parks the vehicle before taking the trip request.

As we drive along the streets of St. Peter, a fully formed version of small town America emerges. City and community parks abound with the city clearly readying itself for its Fourth of July festivities little over a week away. O’Connell and Albers point out key trip generators — senior housing, educational facilities, employment centers and the college — along the journey.

On St. Peter’s west side, as we approach Gustavus Adolphus College, Albers talks about the huge tornado in 1998 that ripped through the core of the town, killing one and destroying, according to the city’s official website, two-thirds of the town. Clearly, it’s a defining moment for all local residents as everyone on the bus begins discussing where they were that day. Rebuilding what was lost began the next morning.

As the trip nears its conclusion, we pull up behind the other St. Peter Transit bus in service that afternoon. Fisher smiles and lets us know that, “The driver of the bus in front of us has been driving a St. Peter Transit bus as long as I’ve been alive.”

Albers and O’Connell begin discussing the dedication of their 10 drivers, their safety record and uncanny ability to find every pick-up and destination. Fisher acknowledges that he can’t imagine a neighborhood — or street, for that matter — that he hasn’t visited.

Before we make it back to the city building and end our trip, the bus makes one more pick-up, at the Fashion Corner hair salon. We pause for a moment, and then a door opens and a perfectly coifed, gray haired passenger boards the bus. It’s the quintessential rural transit trip — the hair dresser — and it perfectly sums up St. Peter Transit’s traditional rural service.

“Good transit extends people’s quality of life,” says O’Connell.

The best transit operations — be they urban, suburban or rural — respond efficiently to their community’s mobility needs with right-sized operations that seamlessly fit into the service area. St. Peter Transit, entering its second 25 years of service, is a perfect example of a successful small-town rural transit service.
A Natural Fit: 
Metro Bus Captures the Spirit of St. Cloud

By Rich Sampson

Traverse any of the streets and bridges spanning central Minnesota’s largest community of St. Cloud and it won’t take long to notice the regular presence of the region’s black, red and white Metro Bus vehicles. Emblazoned on the buses and vans – and many other locations – is the system’s credo: the People Picker-Uppers. It’s a mission that goes far beyond running vehicles and making stops to include a robust travel training and mobility management program, extensive outreach to one of the region’s largest Somali populations, connections to regional transportation providers and a new customer service facility in the heart of St. Cloud.

These and other innovations are the hallmarks of Metro Bus’ ongoing quest to serve the area’s more than 100,000 residents with innovative and responsive transit options. New technologies and strategies represent more than a desire to act as early adopters. Instead, Metro Bus has found that their aggressive approach to new mobility concepts has delivered growing numbers of riders and increasing levels of community support.

Outreach Is Essential

The St. Cloud Metropolitan Transportation Commission was established by the Minnesota Legislature in 1969 to provide transit service in St. Cloud and the surrounding cities of Sartell, Sauk Rapids and Waite Park. Today, Metro Bus provides more than 2.4 million trips per year based on a history of innovation and exemplary customer service. That tradition has been solidified by a dynamic and multi-faceted approach to interacting with the community, one necessitated by a diverse set of

Metro Bus’ downtown St. Cloud Transfer Center is an inviting presence for transit.
rider cohorts. The St. Cloud area is a “regional activity center,” according to Tom Cruikshank, Metro Bus Marketing & Planning Director who’s been with the organization for 23 years. Cruikshank notes the city and surrounding communities offer services that require transit service to fulfill a multitude of needs, including for seniors, people with disabilities, medical and health care as well as students at nearly a half-dozen colleges and universities: St. Cloud State University (SCSU), St. Cloud Technical & Community College (SCTCC), College of St. Scholastica, Minnesota School of Business and Rasmussen College, along with immigrants and refugee communities – among others.

Due to those disparate needs, the system has prioritized a host of customer service mechanisms to better utilize transit service. Although Metro Bus benefits from well-diversified investment streams. These include extensive use of federal Small Transit Intensive Cities (STIC) formula funds – along with other federal, state and local support – achieving greater utilization of existing service options allows that investment to serve more of the community. In particular, the agency has been especially engaged in helping more seniors and people with disabilities take advantage of the Metro Bus fixed-route bus lines through its travel training and mobility management program.

Metro Bus offers an intensive travel training component as part of its eligibility process for its Dial-a-Ride paratransit service. In recent years, use of Dial-a-Ride has skyrocketed as those with limited mobility found the operation essential to their daily lives. And yet, the cost per trip on Dial-a-Ride has impacted Metro Bus’ operating budget while also providing less flexible options for riders than fixed route.

The agency responded to these bidirectional challenges by taking a closer look at why more Dial-a-Ride customers avoided the more frequent, fully accessible Metro Bus routes. Led by Travel Training Coordinator Debbie Anderson – who’s overseen the program for five years – Metro Bus determined many paratransit riders found the fixed-route network a daunting obstacle, with sidewalks to negotiate, larger vehicles that could seem intimidating and firm schedules to meet. To help paratransit riders become more comfortable with Metro Bus, the travel training program conducts transit simulation exercises with both current and potential riders that replicates an actual trip on Metro Bus under less stressful conditions, often using a not-in-service bus and focused attention in one-on-one sessions, small groups or classroom settings on how the fixed-route network can meet their needs.

“We empower people to keep their independence,” says Anderson in describing the Travel Training program. “We are aggressive in reaching out with travel training before the Metro Bus system becomes too daunting a proposition.”

Metro Bus’ perspective on active outreach extends from interacting with non-English-speak-
ing populations to driver training exercises, indicating a priority of community engagement that encompasses every department in the agency. More than 13,000 Somali immigrants – many who fled that nation’s ongoing societal unrest and brutal poverty – reside in and around St. Cloud, most of whom use Metro Bus services to access the area. Of the system’s four travel trainers, two are Somali-speaking who directly engage the Somali community to determine their mobility needs and how the operation might better respond to them.

Meanwhile, Metro Bus conducts a rigorous driver training effort, led by drivers Dean Henkemeyer and Jerry Gillman, who oversee the Metro Bus and Dial-a-Ride training programs, respectively. The program’s peer-to-peer focus that enriches customer service has produced greater buy-in among the drivers according to Henkemeyer and Gillman. Moreover, like most other systems we visited across Minnesota, drivers competing in statewide and local road-racing competitions are both a source of individual pride and collective professionalism.

“It’s more of a self-correction effort, with less discipline needed and more of an ability to coach drivers through problems before they ever materialize,” says Gillman.

To further entrench the Metro Bus culture of outreach, the system is in the process of opening its Travel Training Center in the center of St. Cloud near the downtown Transit Center – which also serves Jefferson Lines intercity buses as well as Tri-County Action Program and River Rider community transit services – broadening the system’s reach. The facility will allow Metro Bus to conduct its own assessments for Dial-a-Ride eligibility and offer a specialized, indoor transit travel simulation course along with a dedicated customer information location.

“We invest in personal connections,” explains Cruikshank, who adds the facility’s second floor will ultimately house a regional training and coordinated call center. “We stress face-to-face interaction and do not apologize for being aggressive in reaching out to everyone on a personal basis.”

Innovation in a Bus-Building Town

Just outside the St. Cloud urban footprint is the massive manufacturing facility of New Flyer, Inc., one of the nation’s largest transit bus manufacturers. It’s not uncommon to see freshly-painted buses ultimately heading to places as far as San Francisco and Pittsburgh plying local roads and highways on testing runs. In that environment, it’s not surprising to find the region’s transit provider an eager and ambitious purveyor of new vehicles and technologies. Accordingly, Metro Bus received federal investment through the Clean Fuels grant program to construct a Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) fueling facility and subsequently purchase 18 CNG vehicles from New Flyer, which will offer a 60 percent reduction in fuel costs over the current diesel-powered buses they’ll replace. The area’s energy provider – Xcel Energy – is in the process of installing a direct natural gas line, which will supply the CNG fueling station, which will also offer CNG fuel for both municipal and private vehicles.

“We appreciate the unique opportunity to operate clean and fuel-efficient New Flyer buses...
in the town where they are built,” says Cruikshank. “We’re proud to support a large local manufacturer while also providing our riders with environmentally-friendly, economical and accessible vehicles.”

At the same time, the system has already deployed GPS-powered Automated Vehicle Locators (AVLs) on the entirety of its fleet. The agency employs Mentor Engineering’s STREETs program to track its vehicle locations to provide better customer service and improve efficiency, while it’s also currently working to install real-time information to riders on the Metro Bus network and has been steadily strengthening its social networking presence on both Facebook and Twitter — crucial to connect with students in a college town. Metro Bus directly serves SCSU and SCTCC with its College Connect portfolio of services, which provide fare-free service under both schools’ U-Pass programs. At the SCSU campus, Metro Bus offers 11 different route options — including the on-campus Husky Shuttle, Campus Clippers to off-campus housing locations, the Route 93 Sundowner evening line and the 94 and 95 Late-Nite routes, while five distinct Metro Bus lines serve SCTCC. The College of St. Scholastica, Minnesota School of Business and Rasmussen College are all located on the Route 3 line through the West Side.

Moreover, beyond facilitating other regional connections at its downtown St. Cloud transit center, Metro Bus hosts the Northstar Link commuter bus service between St. Cloud and

The streets of St. Cloud, Minnesota are plied not only by the familiar St. Cloud Metro Bus vehicles, but also by a fleet of buses with the logos, color schemes and stripes of transit agencies across North America. The provenance of these buses, invariably, is the large New Flyer Bus plant on St. Cloud’s south side. It’s the largest such plant in the U.S.

“The road test is one of the final phases of construction,” says New Flyer’s Keith Rich, who escorted the DigitalCT team on a facility tour. “You’ll see buses from around the U.S. and Canada on local streets here in St. Cloud.”

The enormous New Flyer manufacturing facility in St. Cloud, the company’s biggest in the U.S., is a complete bus build shop, with an output of 650 40-foot and 60-foot articulated buses passing through annually. The facility employs 540 people. New Flyer, which is headquartered in Winnipeg, Manitoba, has another U.S. manufacturing plant in Crookston, Minn. By manufacturing buses in both Crookston and St. Cloud, the company complies with Buy America regulations.

“Each bus makes three full passes along our quarter-mile assembly process before emerging for road testing,” says Rich. Indeed, it is difficult to see from one end of the plant to the other. The signs that appear at regular intervals on the plant floor reading, “Excellence is doing the little things well,” are impossible to miss.

“That’s our commitment: Building the best bus possible,” says Rich, who previously served as a supervisor on the plant floor. “We have high standards here.”

Last year, Rich says that New Flyer enjoyed 38 percent of the U.S. public transportation marketplace. The company recently introduced a new vehicle, the Midi, a 30- or 35-foot, medium-sized low-floor bus with a 10-year, 350,000-mile life expectancy. More recently, New Flyer announced its acquisition of North American Bus Industries (NABI) last month.

New Flyer’s Chairman of the Board, Brian Tobin, commented, “The acquisition of NABI marks an important milestone for New Flyer and is consistent with the company’s strategic plan to ensure market and technology leadership, while providing public transit operators with long-term stability and excellence in product support. We have been able to proceed with this transaction while maintaining a flexible and conservative approach to our balance sheet.”
the Northstar Commuter Rail station in Big Lake, which operates into downtown Minneapolis. The service – which may ultimately be supplemented by direct rail service to St. Cloud – provides multiple weekday roundtrips coordinated with commuter rail departures and arrivals at Big Lake, along with more limited weekend service.

“There’s no one way to serve everyone in this region, but we work to have as many options as possible and provide them with first class professionalism and customer service,” says Cruikshank.

Always Looking…

As an agency whose primary directive is picking up people, the varied services provided by St. Cloud Metro Bus are among the most vibrant signs of activity in central Minnesota, whether people are being picked up or dropped off – reinforcing the People Picker-Uppers slogan. That ability stems from an ever-present search – from drivers and dispatchers to managers and elected officials – to find new ways to communicate with and serve people.

“We’re always looking for something new to do,” Cruikshank says, reflecting on the Metro Bus eyes-wide-open philosophy. “Sometimes we’re a squeaky wheel, but it’s always in the interest of doing better everyday.”
Bemidji: A Town Where Legend and Reality Freely Mix

By Scott Bogren

Bemidji is a college town of nearly 15,000 people in north-central Minnesota, an area of the state where — more than anywhere else — the mythological exploits of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox are celebrated. Among others, there’s Paul Bunyan Drive, the Paul Bunyan Playhouse, the Paul Bunyan State Forest and the Paul Bunyan State Trail (clearly, Babe needs a better press agent!). Upon entering Bemidji (pronounced beh-MIDGE-ee), visitors immediately encounter, on the south shore of Lake Bemidji, two gigantic statues of Paul and Babe with which virtually every visitor simply must be photographed.

A place where legend and reality freely mix, it should come as no surprise that Bemidji’s local public transportation operator has been known as Paul Bunyan Transit since a joint powers agreement between the city and Beltrami County in 1999 consolidated two separate transit agencies into a single, more cost-effective and efficient, operation. It also stands to reason that Paul Bunyan Transit should be led by a larger-than-life transit manager who has led the agency through a remarkable growth period in the past decade and whose entire transit team is committed to both its passengers and the community.

“Our staff really has its finger on the pulse of this community,” says Paul Bunyan Transit Executive Director Greg Negard, between sips of black coffee as he spoke to the DigitalCT Magazine staff in the agency’s utilitarian kitchen area. “We’re very efficient, our drivers are professional and we’re building our services to meet an ever-growing need here in Bemidji.”

Like many in the community and public transit field, Negard never really set out to run a transit operation. Previous stints as a school teacher and newspaper distributor in Utah found him wanting more.
“I wanted to live by water,” says Negard of the main reason he and his wife moved to Bemidji. He soon found himself working locally as a job counselor, but answered a help wanted ad for the transit manager position.

“During the interview, I recall answering one question about what I’d do different by saying I’d be sure no dirty, grimy buses were sent out into service. They called back later that morning and offered the job.” One of the first places Negard takes visitors to Paul Bunyan Transit is, not surprisingly, the vehicle wash bay. It seems that both at home and work, Negard is never far from water.

From Local to Regional

Providing safe, efficient public transportation services in Bemidji is not easy. The winters are cold, windy and long. From a dispatching perspective, there are no fewer than 425 lakes within a 25-mile radius of the city.

A key moment in the system’s growth was its adoption, in 2004 of both automatic vehicle locating software and mobile data terminals. But don’t take that to mean that the system is completely automated.

“We love technology,” says Negard. “But we know that the local knowledge of both our dispatchers and drivers is important — 100 percent automated just wouldn’t work here.”

“We serve people who just can’t hop in the cars and go,” says Negard. “Our riders are largely people with disabilities, senior citizens and working people.” Paul Bunyan has a contract with Bemidji State University and its 5,300 students, offering unlimited, fare-free service. Another vital service contract for Paul Bunyan Transit is with the Developmental Achievement Center (DAC) of Bemidji. A local sheltered workshop, DAC approached Negard and Paul Bunyan Transit about taking over transportation to its headquarters, just up the street from the transit agency’s facility.

“They’re (DAC officials) not transportation experts and don’t want to be,” says Negard. “They just want to be sure their clients have safe transportation that they don’t have to worry about — and it helps us earn our own way in terms of local share.”

With the DAC contract in hand, Negard took the additional revenues coming into Paul Bunyan Transit and increased pay for the system’s 17 drivers — including providing health care benefits to drivers.

“They’re such professionals, our drivers,” says Negard. “They are the face of Paul Bunyan Transit and we’re happy to provide the people that take such good care of our local citizens with a health care benefit. They know our customers — who we’re picking up and dropping off and where.”

Unlike in other parts of the state, Negard says he has few problem finding and retaining drivers. “If I can keep ’em for 6 months, I have ’em for life.”
“Every time I think we’re done growing, something comes up.”

In 2011, Paul Bunyan Transit’s 14 buses served just under 100,000 riders, up from 65,000 passengers in 2004. The system serves Bemidji with a largely demand-response service, with some route deviation. Subscription trips make up 40 percent of the agency’s trips. The system operates 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Friday and from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Saturday. Base fare for a Paul Bunyan Transit trip is $1.50. A full 60 percent of PBT’s trips are same day requests.

“We’re not about putting a million people on our buses, but the 100,000 we do transport are really important,” says Negard. “Every time I think we’re done growing, then something comes up. We just want to make sure people get the rides they need. If we can keep grandma home, it saves everyone and keeps up her quality of life.”

Farebox, contract revenue and advertisement account for 85 percent of the operating revenue. Paul Bunyan Transit receives no local contribution for operating from either Beltrami County or the city. However, they do assist with the 20 percent local match for bus purchases.

Negard and his team run PBT like a business and look for practical, common-sense solutions to the community’s mobility needs.

“This is not a social service agency, we run this like any other business,” says Negard. “And if we don’t run it like a business, we won’t be around very long.”

Bemidji has grown into a regional center in recent years, and Paul Bunyan Transit’s top three destinations of the local medical clinic, Wal-Mart and the community resource center attest to this transition.

Tuesdays, according to Negard, are when PBT makes its scheduled grocery trips runs. On busy grocery runs, the local store sends along a bagger on the bus to help people get their grocery bags into their homes. Understandably, it’s a popular service and when a new store manager threatened to end it, the riders spoke up loud and clear.

“The message from both our passengers and store leadership was simple: You will continue this service,” says Negard.

A New Facility

In 2009 PBT won an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant to remodel its headquarters. Located alongside a set of freight rail tracks in an industrial park, the facility offers connections to Jefferson Lines buses. As we toured the new facility, several Jefferson passengers began arriving.

In addition to vehicle storage — which is crucial given Bemidji’s rough winters — the new facility allowed the system to hire its own mechanic and maintenance staff. Andy Branham operates out of a well-lit and clean maintenance shop and, according to Negard, saves the system more than $50,000 a year. The system’s regularly used wash bay is next to the maintenance area.

“The remodeled facility has made such a difference to us,” says Negard, “and we still have room to grow.”

Back inside the operations section of the
building, Negard points to Paul Bunyan Transit Operations Manager and Safety Coordinator LuAnn Bleiler as vital to the organization’s success.

“She makes it all happen,” says Negard of Bleiler. “I can’t say where we’d be without her.”

Bleiler’s office includes a window into the next door dispatching area where two dispatchers — Greg Marotte and Jim Peterson — are busy booking trips and communicating with drivers. It turns out one is doing the dispatch work for Paul Bunyan Transit while the other is doing the same under a shared dispatching agreement for the Hubbard County Heartland Express in Park Rapids, about 50 miles south of Bemidji. In 2011, this system provided nearly 30,000 trips. The arrangement, according to both the Minnesota DOT and Negard, reduces administrative costs while boosting cost effectiveness.

No Fish Story

Negard’s office is at the far end of the facility, its walls adorned with a large Northern Pike and Lake Trout Negard caught on fishing trips. He did, after all, come to Bemidji for the water.

But the success of Paul Bunyan Transit and the role of Negard’s leadership in its success is no fish story, nor is it a mythical tale involving a giant lumber jack and his outsized ox. The reality is something much simpler and easier to explain: Good leadership, excellent front-line staff and important local partners have crafted a transit service that is finding its regional and city-wide niche.

“Every day is different in this business,” says Negard, smiling. “We work at the small things before they become big challenges. The job here is just moving people.”
At first blush, the main drag through Roseau, Minn., – Main Ave. – doesn’t seem all that different from any other Midwest Main Street. There’s a hardware store on one corner, the town’s original bank building on another, a short line railroad hauling freight past a small depot at one end. But few towns feature a set of speakers on a lamppost at a busy intersection offering selections of Americana music or a pub across the street, which includes a bustling-all-day bowling alley catering to shift workers at the nearby Polaris plant that manufactures the snow-mobiles and all-terrain vehicles that can be spotted throughout Minnesota. Local native Dustin Byfuglien brought the Stanley Cup here after winning it with the Chicago Blackhaws in 2010.

In the midst of this unusual small town tableaux – before you get to the railroad tracks – are the tidy and welcoming offices of FAR North Transit. Developed more than two decades ago to help seniors and people with disabilities get around Roseau (pronounced Rose-OH) a little easier, the system located just a few miles from the Canadian border in Manitoba is now a provider of regional mobility in the northernmost reaches of the continental United States.

Building on a Foundation of Volunteers

Even before the first vans of Roseau County Area Transit (RCAT) – the precursor to today’s FAR North Transit – began to roll
in 1990, local residents had access to well-established volunteer transportation service via Senior Medical Travel for long-distance trips to medical appointments, as the name implies. And while Senior Medical Travel – which is coordinated by FAR North Transit today – offered good opportunities for some trips, travel was more difficult during the winter, when fewer volunteer drivers were willing to risk northern Minnesota’s fierce snow and cold, and others needed more regular transportation in and around Roseau on a routine basis.

In response to these growing needs for local mobility, the Roseau County Committee on Aging expanded its transportation portfolio beyond Senior Medical Travel in 1990 by creating RCAT. The service began with just a single vehicle supported by investment through the federal section 5310 program and the Minnesota Department of Transportation, as well as the sort of unique local fund-raising mechanisms employed by similar rural transportation providers around the country in their early days, including a Hawaiian luau, parades and a rocking-chair marathon.

“They rocked and rocked for hours, some of the ladies were crocheting and knitting,” says Sandy Otto, the system’s first Director and now Chair of its Board of Directors, who began working for Senior Medical Travel in 1982. “We had to do whatever we could to put together local funds to get started.”

The homespun investment streams paid off as local residents grew increasingly aware of the value of vibrant mobility options. The service opened employment, medical and social opportunities for people with disabilities who previously couldn’t access Senior Medical Travel unless they were older than 65, and broadened the reach of seniors to live fully and independently in Roseau County. As awareness of the opportunities presented by RCAT expanded, the operation began pushing at the boundaries of its service framework: requests increased for service beyond Roseau County – some health care service was only provided in Bemidji more than 2 hours south or Grand Forks, N.D., across the state line – while residents in neighboring Lake of the Woods County envied the level of mobility enjoyed by their counterparts in Roseau.

As a result, RCAT transitioned into FAR North Transit in 2003 as service was expanded into Lake of the Woods County (the northernmost county in the nation) and opened to all residents in both counties, befitting the system’s new acronym: For All Residents (FAR). The expansion not only presented the promise of regional mobility to everyone in the two-county region – famous for its high school hockey rivalry between the Roseau High School Rams and the Warroad Warriors on par with high school basketball in Indiana or Friday night football in Texas – it gave the new entity a defining mission: to serve as the primary provider of public mobility in northern Minnesota.

Vital Stats
Organization: FAR North Transit
Director: Steve Butler
Founded: 1990
Annual Ridership: 28,000
Number of Vehicles: 3
Website: farnorthtransit.com

In Their Own Words
FAR North Transit Director Steve Butler describes the opportunities and challenges of providing rural mobility.
“The change to FAR North was a much bigger task than RCAT and Senior Medical Travel,” explains Otto, who retired in 2004 as Director, but is still involved as Board Chair. “It was a changed perception, but also a new opportunity to help the community.”

The More Things Change...

Today, FAR North Transit provides more than 28,000 annual rides using three vehicles – an impressive feat considering the combined two-county population comes in around 19,000 total. Most riders are heading to medical appointments, shopping locations, community services and social engagements. Due to the statewide investment in community and public transportation operations initiated by the Minnesota Legislature in the early 1990s – as well as existing federal operating funds – FAR North provides service supported by contracts with local organizations such as the area’s Developmental Achievement Center (DAC) and local farebox recovery.

Although the statewide operating support has largely removed the need for quirky local revenue efforts like the luaus and rocking-chair marathons of the past, the system still backs some of its administrative costs by hosting regular community garage sales held, literally, in the FAR North maintenance garage. The garage was part of a new facility opened in 2005 with a mix of federal, state and local investment, owing to the system’s change from RCAT to FAR North two years earlier, as well as a 2002 flood in Roseau that had damaged much of the city.

“We’re glad to be right here in the center of town,” says current FAR North Transit Director Steve Butler, who took over from Otto following her 2004 retirement. “It helps to be right in the mix of the activity here. People see us and know what we’re up to.”

With Butler at the helm, the system continues to focus on the opportunities and challenges that come with a largely rural region that faces significant obstacles from weather and geography. Both Butler and Otto boast of the system’s drivers’ impeccable safety record during the long, frigid winters at a time when ridership is at its highest, as seniors and people with disabilities seek a safe, dependable alternative to driving.
“Once the snow is here – usually in November or December – it’s here until the spring,” says Butler. “People here really look to us during those times. There’s no other way to get around.”

Ridership is growing among other key segments, as well. More workers at the Polaris plant on the outskirts of Roseau rely on FAR North for daily employment transportation. At the same time, trips within a 5-mile radius in Warroad and Baudette are FAR North’s fastest-growing source of passengers. According to Butler, although these trips are of a different scope than FAR North’s traditional ridership base, they’re all equally important to the system’s future.

“We always expect new opportunities and growth every year,” says Butler, who adds the system is exploring ways to connect with intercity connections to places like Bemidji and Grand Forks. “We’re never scared to have some new thinking.”

People Are The Greatest Asset

The official motto of the city of Roseau is *Feels Like Home*. Meanwhile, a hand-crafted metal sign at the entrance to FAR North’s facility displays an inviting, “Welcome Friends.”

There is little sleuthing required to encounter the inherent hospitality of people in northern Minnesota, maybe their mutual fortitude in outlasting a long winter makes everyday matters a little less taxing. It’s that spirit of welcoming and endurance that best defines the work of FAR North Transit.

“People are the biggest asset of this town,” says Butler. “We’re a great deal for families of all kinds and we’re here to help.”

CT
Even if you’ve never experienced the work of Arrowhead Transit first-hand, it nevertheless feels like a homecoming when visiting the system that connects the eight counties of the most northeastern stretches of Minnesota – spanning the shores of Lake Superior to the well-mined caverns of the Iron Range – which together form a rough outline of an arrowhead. The communities and people of the region find solidarity in the contours of the arrowhead shape, as services, destinations and trends help define the area’s trajectory. That regional cohesiveness is perhaps best understood through the work of Arrowhead Transit, one of the nation’s oldest and largest rural, regional community transportation providers.

Connecting rural areas, small towns and scattered cities, Arrowhead Transit carries more than a half million annual riders across northeastern Minnesota by offering extensive demand-response service that meets the needs of seniors, people with disabilities, workers, students and children. From a limited operation that first began in the mid-1970s, the system has added new counties over the majority of the past four decades by stressing responsiveness, efficiency and customer service.

**Partnerships to Regionalism**

The story of how a small, rural transportation service catering largely to the needs of seniors in 1974 transitioned to a substantial, 8-county transit network today is primarily a tale of partnerships. That year, a partnership between Cook, Itasca, Koochiching and St. Louis counties established one of Minnesota’s first mobility options targeted specifically for seniors using investment through the Older Americans Act with a fleet of four vans under the auspices of the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA). And even though that funding was limited to a year’s use, the nascent operation reached out to the Minnesota Department of Transportation to shift the system’s focus to general public transportation, while still maintaining crucial access for seniors.

A year later, Lake County joined the network, which from then after was known as Arrowhead Transit, and momentum was readily apparent. Aitkin County followed not all that long after in 1979. Even in the mid-1970s, the agency recognized the connection between access to mobility options, employment and community development, decades before relationships between the transit, workforce and social services communities became commonplace.

“The need grew and the word got out, which brought other counties along,” says AEOA Executive Director Harlan Tardy, only the community action agency’s second director since its formation in 1964. “Many of the needs came together – from seniors to housing to employment – and transit was the best way to connect them.”
By the time Carlton County was integrated into the system in 1986, Arrowhead Transit stretched from the shores of Lake Superior to the Canadian border, marking one of the largest transit service areas in the nation. St. Louis County, alone, spans more than 6,800 square miles and is the second largest county in the county, after Maine’s Aroostook County. And although the region is dotted with a handful of cities – ranging from Duluth and International Falls to Hibbing and Ely – the area’s geographic largesse produces a mostly rural population, separated by long distances between homes and destinations.

During the 1970s and ‘80s – when Arrowhead Transit was forging these new connections between rural towns and communities – there was scant national profile for the kind of services they were offering. Hoping to boost discussion of policy, legislation, advocacy and training to benefit community transportation systems like Arrowhead, its founding director – the late Judy Byman – worked with her peers around the country to form the National Association for Transportation Alternatives (NASTA), the precursor to today’s Community Transportation Association of America, along with Rural America.

“Judy Byman was the heart and soul of Arrowhead Transit from the very beginning,” says Tardy, who worked alongside Byman at AEOA throughout her entire tenure with the agency. “She was a great planner, figuring out the various funding needed and ran a very good team.”

Leveraging a Legacy of Innovation

As one of the nation’s first and largest regional community transportation providers, Arrowhead Transit today both reflects its innovative roots and embraces new opportunities for its future. The system carries more than 500,000 annual riders on a fleet of more than 80 vehicles operated and supported by 60 drivers and dispatchers and another 30 mechanics, managers and administrative personnel, one of the most extensive rural transit operations in the country. A total of 10 maintenance facilities and garages – of which five are directly owned by Arrowhead Transit – keep the operation going, no small feat considering northeastern Minnesota’s cold, snowy winters. Pine County recently came onboard to mark Arrowhead’s eighth service county, largely through the same partnership-first focus that has defined the system’s history.

“We spent a lot of time there – working with advisory committees, meeting one-on-one with elected officials,” says Arrowhead Transit Assistant Director Joe Gentile, himself a former driver who helped coordinate Pine County’s integration into the network. Gentile was mentored into his position by Mary Fossen, who had been the system’s Associate Director for 33 years.

“She was an amazing lady,” says Gentile. “She put her heart and soul into Arrowhead Transit. She was the constant in all the developments and changes that took place at Arrowhead Transit. She worked under four
different directors during her years here. She could work with anybody, but more than that, she knew how to get things done. Whatever they threw at her, she would make it work.”

Like many other transit systems across Minnesota, Arrowhead Transit is able to support its operations using a mix of state investment through Minnesota’s motor vehicle registration fees, farebox revenues and contracts with local agencies and programs, meaning no local tax revenues are needed. Currently, Arrowhead manages more than 10 separate service contracts, ranging from community colleges to several Developmental Achievement Centers. These contracted services not only align with the core base of riders drawn to the system’s varied options – such as students, seniors and people with disabilities – but also work together to keep fares low (no one-way fare is more than $5, anywhere in the eight-county area, with some trips traveling more than 80 miles each direction) while also avoiding local taxes.

“We have tremendous support from the state of Minnesota as well as a number of local contracts, which we work hard to maintain,” says Arrowhead Transit Director Jack Larson, who assumed the system’s leadership in 2004. “It eases the burden on local property taxes so we can support local residents and a strong economy.”

**A Resilient Focus on Employment**

As a service arm of the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA) – all Arrowhead Transit employees wear AEOA name badges – the importance of the system’s impact on local employment and economic development is never too far removed from daily decisions. Although unemployment rates in the Arrowhead region have been declining in recent months, its 6.7 percent rate is still the highest in Minnesota. In cooperation with the Minnesota Workforce Center, Arrowhead operates the Rural Rides program – supported by investment through the federal Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program – which is specifically targeted to connect residents with employment locations, especially people with limited incomes.

In addition to helping workers and job-seekers determine if Arrowhead’s existing services can connect them to work sites – sometimes at reduced fares, Rural Rides helps identify ride-sharing, volunteer driver and taxi options if transit options don’t meet their needs. Participants can receive up to three months of assistance – in the form of fare discounts, vouchers for taxis and fuel vouchers ride-sharing and volunteer drivers for up to three months while a person obtains and maintains employment.

Transportation is always a major concern for low-income individuals, especially in rural environments,” says Kyle Erickson, Job Development Supervisor for AEOA. “We do have excellent public transportation, but it is fragmented because of the rural nature of this region. Rural Rides helps those who cannot afford the bus and fills in the gaps in public transportation. Transportation should not be a reason for not finding employment.”

(For additional details on the Rural Rides program, see our [Joblinks Employment Transportation Brief here](#) – ed)

In addition to the Rural Rides program, Arrowhead Transit has been active in responding to the mobility needs of veterans. This year, the system began dedicated service to help veterans reach Community-Based Outpatient Clinics in Hibbing and Ely, as well as coordinating with the [Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans](#) to provide information on mobility options. And while all disabled veterans ride free on Arrowhead Transit vehicles, many more could benefit if the agency were able to provide direct service to the [Twin Ports VA Clinic](#) in Superior, Wis., adjacent to Duluth. Currently, state regulations prevent Arrowhead from serving the Twin Ports Clinic,
but the system’s leaders are working feverishly to resolve the obstacle.

“We’re always looking to do more to better serve our nation’s veterans,” says Larson. “As soon as we can get our vehicles over to Superior, we will.”

**Always Evolving: The Work of An Original Community Transit Provider**

Like so many community transportation providers across the nation – connecting small towns and rural regions – evolution and innovation are prerequisites to continued stability and success. Across eight counties with a multitude of ways of serving them, Arrowhead Transit is in perpetual motion, which is fine with them.

“We’re in the midst of all kinds of things, but part of a community action-type program, it comes naturally to us,” explains Larson. “We have a tough time tooting our own horn sometimes, but our riders are the ones who can and should be rewarded.” **CT**
Hibbing, Minnesota played host to one of the key moments in America’s public transportation history. In 1914, two Hibbing residents — Carl Wickman and Andrew Anderson — used their Hupmobile to transport miners between Hibbing and Alice and thus give birth to the American bus industry. Their fledgling bus service grew to become the internationally known Greyhound Bus Lines.

This distinction as the birthplace of Greyhound — on its own — would suffice to characterize Hibbing as a town on the move. But a few years later, huge iron ore deposits were discovered directly beneath the town. So, beginning in 1919 and throughout the 1920s, the town of Hibbing was moved two miles south to its present location, building-by-building, using logs and steel wheels. In all, 180 homes and 20 businesses were dragged south to make room for what became the world’s largest open-pit iron ore mine — so large, in fact, that it became known as the Grand Canyon of the North.

The journey from its halcyon days when the iron ore beneath Hibbing resident’s feet fueled the American industrial revolution and the burgeoning steel industry throughout the Great Lakes region to today’s standing as a pleasantly livable small town is in many ways a uniquely 20th century American experience. Oh, and along the way, Hibbing spawned a local musician, Robert Zimmerman, known worldwide as Bob Dylan.

A Public-Private Partnership

Fast forward to today and Hibbing (population 16,000) is served by a local transit system — Hibbing Area Transit — that is operated by Shubat Transportation under contract to the city. Shubat’s headquarters are south of downtown Hibbing, off an access road alongside Route 169 (yes, the same Route 169 that serves as Main Street in St. Peter, some 250 miles to the south). In a state that offers the full compliment of transit service types, modes and arrangements, the Shubat-City of Hibbing arrangement is an efficient model.

Hibbing Area Transit
“We have a great relationship with city hall,” says Shubat Transportation General Manager Lisa Samsa. “We talk regularly about the service.”

Mary Ann Kepler is an accountant with the city of Hibbing under whose auspices the transit service falls. “I happened to be the city staff member who showed enthusiasm for transit and I like it,” she says about how she ended up with Hibbing’s transit portfolio.

The city has contracted out the service for all of Kepler’s 13 years on the job and she agrees with Samsa about the importance of the Shubat-city relationship: “The city realizes that a contractor can do a better job of providing the very best transit service to our residents. It’s really a good coordination of effort and we can both pick up the phone and speak with each other right away if any issues come up.”

Samsa explains that the contract to operate Hibbing Area Transit comes up for renewal ever four years — with this year being one of those years. Under the current contract, the city owns the four buses and performs the vehicle maintenance, while Shubat provides the drivers and the insurance. In addition to the Hibbing transit services, Shubat provides half of the city school bus service and offers local and regional charter transportation services.

“If there wasn’t this bus…”

Samsa, whose tenure at Shubat began in 2010, has seen ridership on the rise in recent years. State DOT data, in fact, shows that ridership has increased nearly 60 percent on Hibbing Area Transit since 2007.

“I attribute this to our drivers,” says Samsa. “We have a wonderful group of drivers who really look after our passengers and get to know them.”

Kepler agrees: “Ridership is up because the service is better and more reliable. The drivers with our contractor (Shubat) offer excellent customer service, which also helps.”

The system operates a single bus in deviated fixed-route service and two in dial-a-ride service, Monday-Friday: 6:00 a.m. – 8:00 p.m., Saturday 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.; and Sunday, 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. The fixed-route bus will be at the city library at the bottom of each hour, and at Wal-Mart at the top of the hour. The buses are 18-passenger body-on-chassis vehicles with two wheelchair placements. Base fare is $2, though a frequent ride pass offers 15 trips for $15.

According to Samsa, Hibbing Area Transit’s ridership roughly breaks down with a quarter of the riders being seniors, a quarter people with disabilities and the other half general public riders. Employment trips and service to Hibbing Community College are the bulk of the general public trips.

Vital Stats

Organization: Hibbing Area Transit
Manager: Mary Ann Kepler
Annual Ridership: 55,000
Number of Vehicles: 4
Website: hibbing.mn.us
“Our riders are largely the transportation disadvantaged,” says Kepler. “Many would find themselves terribly isolated without the service. From both phone conversations and occasionally riding the bus and talking to the passengers, many have a story that usually begins with, ‘if there wasn’t this bus...’”

**Hibbing’s Transit Future**

Coordinating with Arrowhead Transit, which serves the full extent of St. Louis County in which Hibbing is one town, is clearly on the horizon for Hibbing Transit. In 2011, the city completed a transit operations study in cooperation with the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission that, among others, recommends coordinated routing and scheduling. The study stems from a desire to expand transit.

“We’d really like to extend our transit service,” says Samsa. “Hibbing is — land-wise — an expansive service area and we’d like to cover more of it.”

“Our experience shows us that we can provide good transit service at a low cost-per-ride,” says Kepler.

The plan looked at ways to increase mobility options locally, including options of city buses, regional buses, and possible cooperation with automobile transportation and bicycle and pedestrian interests. According to the plan: “An improved transit service would have the potential to increase economic

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**Bus History: Lovingly Collected and Preserved**

Many of the signs directing visitors to Hibbing, Minnesota’s Greyhound Bus Museum on the north side of town have fallen victim to the harsh local winters, either leaning to one side on the posts to which they’re affixed or appearing weather-worn. Follow them nonetheless, for Hibbing’s Greyhound Museum is not to be missed — especially for those whom bus transportation holds a particular fascination.

The entire story of Greyhound, not surprisingly, is unveiled as one traverses the halls, exhibit areas and specific wings of the museum. A video on Greyhound’s history provides a useful jumping off point and is an ideal first stop once you enter the facility.

The most outstanding feature of this museum, without question, is its amazing collection of Greyhound Buses down through the years, from 1927 to 1994. From a sample of the original Hupmobile that provided the first trips between Hibbing and nearby Alice to the iconic, art-deco-inspired ScenicCruisers, from the Supercoach to the Silversides, there is an historic bus to suit any taste — many of which you’re free to board.

Along the way you’ll learn how the company got its name, how it built its own buses, and the emergence of Greyhound stations, terminals and flag stops. There’s even a look at Greyhound’s international presence.

Open mid-May through September, the Greyhound Museum (http://www.greyhoundbusmuseum.org/) has $5 admission fee for adults ($4 for seniors and $2 for students) and is open Monday-Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.; Sunday 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Check in with the Museum at 218.263.5814 to ensure it’s open.
development in the Hibbing area, such as providing a potential increase in employment due to a rise in shopping in the area and the city’s regional trade center status. It could directly correlate with the increase of general health of the city by providing efficient travel to medical appointments, which in turn, would help the general welfare of the city. The city of Hibbing has noticed with other city models that providing better public transportation can provide a strong attraction in relation to drawing residents to their area.”

Returning to its Roots

It seems altogether fitting that a community that helped launch the American bus industry just over a century ago is planning to expand its local transit service because it understands the positive economic and health impact good mobility can engender.

Just as it made perfect sense for two entrepreneurs to provide bus service in 1914, today the service and scope of Hibbing Area Transit — with an eye on a more coordinated and expansive future — is an efficient service provided by the city through its private Shubat contractors and in partnership with the state of Minnesota.

“We’re proud of the good work we’re doing in Hibbing,” says Samsa. CT
Duluth: A City and Transit System in Sync

By Scott Bogren

History abounds at the Duluth Transit Authority. In the system’s headquarters building, right at the entrance, one is met with a vast collection of plaques hung on nearby walls honoring DTA employees going back more than 30 years. A glass case holds a collection of lovingly carved replicas of the system’s rolling stock from the 1970s — crafted by a driver who retired with 36 years of service and no accidents. In an upstairs meeting room on a bookshelf, no fewer than 19 scrapbooks chronicling transit service in Duluth beginning in the 1940s speak to the history of an agency that’s been transporting local residents for 130 years.

Yet like the city it so ably serves, the Duluth Transit Authority is a forward-looking operation that steadfastly refuses to be defined by what it once was. As the city has transitioned from a heavy industrial town known for shipping the nearby Iron Range’s raw materials around the nation and world to one focused on health care, education and tourism, the DTA has evolved alongside it.

“Business is coming back to Duluth and the quality of life is the main reason,” says DTA General Manager Dennis Jensen, whose stewardship of the agency extends back to 1979. Make no mistake, DTA’s growth and local relevance — infused with an emphasis on current transit technology and operational theory — is a direct result of Jensen, and the DTA staffs’, consistent, patient leadership.
Heath Hickok recently joined DTA as its Director of Marketing. As he took the DigitalCT team on a tour of the agency’s headquarters and operations facility, he began with a recitation of its extensive history.

“Transit in Duluth started in 1883 with horse-drawn streetcars,” says Hickok. “We had 16 blocks of track and 7,000 local residents.”

The rest of the Duluth transit history benchmarks coincide with what one might expect nationally, with one unique exception. In 1924 the system began operating its first gas-powered bus. Electric trolleys entered service locally in 1931, only to be replaced by diesel buses in 1957. Transit ridership reached its peak in 1919 with more than 45 million passenger boardings.

In 1891, construction was completed on an incline railway along Duluth’s 7th Avenue. Large enough to carry horse and carriage teams the 500 feet above Lake Superior, the incline railway — powered by cables — served Duluth until its closing in 1939.

A critical moment in local transit history occurred in 1969 when the Minnesota State Legislature created today’s Duluth Transit Authority out of the Duluth Superior Street Railway Company — the local transit operator since its founding in 1933. In early 1970, the DTA’s first citizens advisory board entered into an agreement with ATE Management & Services to operate and manage the system. This contract — ATE was acquired by Ryder Systems in 1996, which in turn was purchased by First Transit in 2001 — remains intact today. Jensen proudly notes that this contract is First Transit’s first.

“Credit really goes to the city of Duluth and its leadership,” says Jensen. “When the Duluth Superior Railway Company went under, the city was determined to keep transit and stepped up.”

**A Geography Made for Transit**

Hickok is quick to note that Duluth is not just the western-most port on the Great Lakes: “We’re on the greatest of the Great Lakes.” The influence of Lake Superior on Duluth, and on movement within the city, is unmistakable.

Rising from the Lake, steep hills reminiscent of San Francisco and Pittsburgh tower to the west of the city, creating a largely linear settlement pattern, thus the emergence of the incline railway. These same hills have restricted the rampant suburban growth that often has hindered transit services due to dispersed, low-density populations. The result is a uniquely transit-friendly geography.

“Duluth is about 5 miles wide and 28 miles long,” says Hickok. “We haven’t seen the typical suburbanization here.” This development pattern allows the DTA to run high-frequency

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**Vital Stats**

Organization: Duluth Transit Authority  
General Manager: Dennis Jensen  
Founded: 1969  
Annual Ridership: 3.1 million  
Number of Vehicles: 72  
Website: duluthtransit.com

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**In Their Own Words**

In this video, Duluth Transit Authority’s Jim Heilig and Heath Hickok explain the system’s history of innovation and responsiveness.
service along high performing corridors that connect downtown with the University of Minnesota-Duluth, health care centers and concentrated housing.

“Transit is vital here because of this geography,” says Jensen. “Also, a lot of people don’t like to drive here in the winter and they depend on us — which is why the high frequency service is critical, we can’t have people waiting too long at bus stops.”

In 2007, DTA purchased its first hybrid-electric buses that deploy regenerative braking that literally take advantage of service up-and-down Duluth’s hills into more fuel-efficient service.

Duluth, with a of 86,000, is the more heavily populated twin city with Superior, Wis., (population 28,000), just across St. Louis Bay. The total Duluth Metropolitan Statistical Area population includes both cities and St. Louis and Douglas counties and totals 280,000. The two cities spurred the local moniker: the Twin Ports. DTA has provided service into Superior since its inception, but the nature of the service is beginning to take on a more regional approach.

“Initially and for years, job opportunities were primarily in Duluth and our service reflected this,” says Jensen. “That always bothered me and today Superior is coming into its own with its own development efforts and we see more reverse commuting going on. We envision a Superior transit center that links directly with Duluth and that is fed by local neighborhood circulators.”

Continuing the Tour

The DTA headquarters and garage, known as the Earl Buck Operations Center, was finished in 1981. Throughout the expansive facility are reminders of the organization’s values and mission.

The DTA Mission is to Provide a Public Transit Service That is Safe, Convenient, Efficient and Affordable,” reads one sign above the elevator. Thank you for Driving Safely Today says another that hangs over the entryway into the garage from W. Michigan Street.

In the driver’s lounge, Hickok points out an informational flat-screen monitor chock full of safety training reminders, system announcements and more. Hickok has the ability to regularly update the system and thus communicate directly with drivers.

“It’s important for our service to be perceived locally as a vital, high-quality, first-class operation,” says Hickok. “The drivers are central to this goal.”

To further this image and burnish its brand, DTA leadership ensures that all the little things are not overlooked. Every bus in service is washed, every day. In a room set off from the main bus storage area, several of system’s new Stride paratransit vehicles are in the process of having logos and stripes applied.

“We want clean, perfectly logoed and perfectly striped vehicles out on the road,” says Hickok.

U-Pass Powers Growth

Last year Duluth Transit ridership edged north of 3.1 million riders. The system’s Stride paratransit operation served another
26,000 riders. Overall, ridership has grown by 10 percent in the past five years aboard the system’s 63 35- and 40-foot buses and nine body-on-chassis Stride vehicles.

An indication of the city’s metamorphosis into a tourism destination is the dramatic rise in bicycle boardings system-wide, which last year surpassed 27,000. Students, not surprisingly, make a large percentage of this total.

Developed to replace some contracted local student services that were being phased out, in 2000 DTA leadership launched its now-popular U-Pass program designed for UM-D students.

“The university was preparing some campus infrastructure improvements and faced the decision of building classrooms or parking,” says Jensen. “That’s where we came in.”

Designed for full-time students and faculty at UM-D, University of Wisconsin-Superior, Lake Superior College and the College of St. Scholastica, the U-Pass program initially launched offering free service for students anywhere in the Twin Ports region using their college ID card. In 2011, the program produced record ridership of nearly 600,000 passengers.

“The U-Pass program is one of the best things we ever did,” says DTA’s Director of Administration Jim Heilig. “And one of the best outcomes of the program is that it helps make students lifetime transit users.”

A New Intermodal Transportation Center

As our facility tour continued, we passed a series of schematics and architectural renderings proudly displayed in an open area of the second floor. Jensen, Heilig and Hickok all paused to discuss the significance of the coming downtown Duluth Multimodal Transportation Center.

“This center is a big part of our future,” says Heilig, “and we’re so pleased that its location has moved back to our first choice site.”

Set to be completed next year, the $27.5 million multimodal transportation center will provide an indoor terminal area for the transferring of bus passengers, including regional and intercity carriers; an eight-bay bus boarding platform, along with an indoor passenger-waiting area, seating and public restrooms; a DTA-staffed information desk, similar to what is currently at the Transit Center East for pass and ticket sales and transit information; bike storage area; a police substation; and public and private parking that will include spaces for van and car pools. The Intermodal Center will serve as a boarding location for Jefferson Lines and Indian Trails inter-city bus lines, along with Arrowhead Transit and LCS Coaches. Also included in the Center will be Wells Fargo drive-through banking services on the second level and other retail spaces. Finally, the center will offer fully enclosed skywalk access to Duluth’s new entertainment and convention center (known locally as DECC).
Jensen also has it in the back of his mind that the new facility might someday become home to the proposed, but not yet funded, Northern Lights Express intercity rail service connecting the Twin Cities with Duluth. A trip-time estimate between the cities is about 2 hours and 15 minutes (for more on the Northern Lights Express, see page 24 – ed).

“I really think the idea of intercity rail between Minneapolis-St. Paul and Duluth is real,” says Jensen.

Moving Forward, With an Eye on the Past

As Jensen leafed through a volume of the Duluth transit scrapbooks, yellowed newspaper articles with faded photos of yesteryear’s transit innovations and successes seemed to provide inspiration to everyone at DTA to continue their legacy of service and commitment to the people of the Twin Ports.

Duluth is dynamic. The waterfront and Canal Park areas are bustling with people, shops, restaurants and hotels. The image of an industrial port city complete with steel mills and heavy manufacturing has been relegated to the scrapbooks of history. Transit has — and will continue to play — a role in the region’s transformation.

“We’ll become a regional transit authority over time,” says Jensen as his colleagues Heilig and Hickok nod. “We’ll see express bus operations, intercity rail and a fully connected community.”

The agency’s voluminous collection of scrapbooks (above) is indicative of an agency with deep roots in the community. The agency utilizes nine fully-accessible vehicles to provide its Stride paratransit service (below left), while its mission (below right) — centrally positioned in its headquarters facility — includes all the touchstones of any responsive and effective mobility provider: safe, convenient, efficient and affordable.
New Transit System Opens in Spring Valley

A partnership between Fillmore County, the Minnesota Department of Transportation and Semcac Community Action Agency led to the establishment of new public transportation service in the city of Spring Valley. Already an operator of public transit services in Dodge, Houston and Winona counties as well as the communities of Houston and Blooming Prairie, Semcac was the natural entity to launch service in Fillmore County. The new system – Fillmore County Public Transit – launched operations on July 1 and operates from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on weekdays and offers curb-to-curb service, fully accessible service for the general public.

One-way fares are set at $1.25 within Spring Valley, with trips up to 20 miles within Fillmore County charged at $2.75 and $4 for the 28-mile trip to nearby Rochester. The service is designed to connect senior dining locations, medical appointments, personal errands, travel to school and daycare, along with other destinations. Twenty four-hour advance notice is required to reserve a ride on the system.

“This is Spring Valley’s public transit, for anyone in the community – not just the elderly – but for anyone, preschool to high school, any age, income, race...it will truly be public transit. As long as they pay the bus fare of $1.25 for a one-way trip, they can go on the bus,” says Semcac Transportation Director Erlene Welshons. “It’s meant to serve the community and get people where they need to go. We offer trips to go shopping, we get lots of kids from daycares to preschool because without the bus, many can’t go to preschool because they come from working families where both parents work.”

Potential Merger of Pine River Ride With Us, Crow Wing Transit Could Improve Service

Although community transit service operated by Ride With Us Bus in Pine River was reduced to three days per week earlier this year, a potential merger with Crow Wing Transit in Brainerd, about 30 miles south, could lead to improved mobility options in both communities. Owing to the improved efficiency and greater resources available through a combination of both systems, the Pine River City Council recently expressed willingness to negotiate a merger with Crow Wing Transit this fall.

Pine River – population 930 – supports the Ride With Us Bus with 15 percent of the service’s operating costs and 20 percent of its capital expenses. While no timetable exists for restoring full weekday service, a merger with Crow Wing Transit could ultimately include regular service between Pine River and Brainerd, an option not currently available. The consolidation would also advance statewide goals to improve service and reduce administrative costs by encouraging regional transit networks.

“We’ve been working with the office of transit for the past year or so, looking at some opportunities to maybe work together with Crow Wing County and Brainerd transit service and the City of Pine River service to see if there’s opportunities to maybe merge the systems together,” says Crow Wing Transit Coordinator Tom Jay. “It’s a priority of the office of transit to look at reducing the
number of contracts that they operate throughout the state of Minnesota, and MNDOT, looking at assistance throughout the state, kind of identified some systems that were really close geographically that operate similar services, and the Crow Wing County and Pine River services made a lot of sense.”

**Mankato Moves Closer to New Transit Facility**

After leaving its current operations center to accommodate the new Children’s Museum of Southern Minnesota, the city of Mankato’s City Bus is moving towards construction of a new facility set to open in 2015. The new, $6.5 million facility will be located at the city’s public works complex at the intersection of Hoffman Road and Victory Drive in the city’s east side utilizing the site of a former Minnesota Department of Transportation regional office. The $5.2 million in investment for the new transit center will come from federal and state sources with the remaining $1.3 million contributed from local funds.

“We’ve actually moved everything out of there into the old public works building, and the public works building is not really designed for that,” said Mankato City Manager Pat Hentges.

In addition to housing the administrative, operations and maintenance functions for City Bus, local leaders are working with Jefferson Lines and Mankato Land to Air Express to provide intercity and regional connectivity at the new facility. Land to Air Express offers service to numerous locations in southern Minnesota as well as the Twin Cities, including Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and Union Depot in downtown St. Paul, and provides direct connections to Jefferson Lines to reach other regional destinations.

**First Retail Tenant Opens at Grand River Station in LaCrosse (Wisc.)**

After opening a temporary space in LaCrosse’s Grand River Station transit center earlier this year, the nonprofit organization Care Wisconsin is expanding its presence in the facility with a 6,000 square-foot location. Care Wisconsin provides long-term health care for more than 3,600 seniors and people with disabilities and oversees its work in western Wisconsin from the Grand River Station site. The station’s high level of accessible design and convenience to LaCrosse’s Municipal Transit Utility (MTU) bus service were key factors in the organization’s decision on where to locate.

The facility’s marketing agent is also in negotiations with a national retailer to follow in the building, leaving only one,1,700-square foot space remaining. Grand River Station opened in August 2010 to serve as a mixed-use transit facility in the small urban community of LaCrosse. In addition to serving as MTU’s central transfer and customer service location, the station includes 92 residential units.

“We wanted to make sure we had tenants where we knew they’d be in there for the long term,” says Casey Weiss, who handles marketing the site’s retail space for building owner Gorman & Co.

(For full details on Grand River Station, see our full-length feature article in our Winter 2011 debut issue of DigitalCT – ed)

**Employment Transportation Service Expands in Central Illinois**

By expanding service from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. on weekdays, Central Illinois Public Transit (CIPT) is seeking to better serve people who work evening and late-night shifts in Shelby
County. The demand-response system – which serves seven counties in central Illinois – expanded its Shelby County evening service after working with area business leaders and the workforce development community.

“One thing that we’ve learned is people really need is a way to look for jobs, and once they get a job, a way to get back and forth to work,” said Kevin Bushur, CEO of CEFS Economic Opportunity Corporation, the parent company of Central Illinois Public Transit. “This is something we are excited to be able to offer. We wanted to be able to offer rides for shift workers and others who might not work straight business hours.”

Fares for all CIPT are $2 for one-way trips within a single county, with a 10-trip book of tickets available for $10. In Shelby County, an unlimited monthly pass is available for $25. The fully-accessible service requires 24-hour advance reservations.

“This is something that will help people,” Shelby County Board Chairman Bruce Cannon said. “It will help them find work and then help them get to work.”

New Cross-County Bus Route Launched in Maryland

With both population and employment opportunities growing in Charles County, Maryland, a new route extending from neighboring Prince George’s County provides new regional connectivity in the southern reaches of the Washington, D.C. area. Operated by The Bus – Prince George’s County’s transit network – the new #36 route links a park-and-ride lot in the city of Clifton in Prince George’s County with several Charles County communities, including Brandywine, Mattawoman, Pinefield and Waldorf.

Service on the #36 route operates every 40 minutes between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. on weekdays. The Clinton park-and-ride lot features numerous connections to other bus routes, including several which connect with stations on the Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority’s 103-mile Metro Rail network. Although the state of Maryland offers three commuter bus routes from Charles County into Washington, D.C. – with another two expected to be added this fall – those routes are primarily geared towards workers heading into Washington in the morning and back in the evening and are often filled to capacity, offering little local midday connectivity.

“We have been screaming for this for years and finally it happens,” said George Clark, a ride-share coordinator with the Tri-County Council for Southern Maryland. “It might take them half a day, but they will be able to get to the Metro station from the northern part of Southern Maryland. Now they can get across the county line, and that’s all everybody wanted.” CT
New Benefits for Members! Join Today!

Becoming a member of the Community Transportation Association of America presents an ever-growing pool of benefits and services, including:

- New Certified Safety and Security Manager (CSSM) Training
- Access to the Insurance Store at CTAA
- The Latest Policy Analysis and an Effective Voice in Washington
- Technical Assistance Programs and Information Resources
- Discounted PASS Driver Training and Certification

Become a member of the Community Transportation Association today by contacting our Membership Director, Caryn Souza, at 202.294.6527 or souza@ctaa.org, or visit www.ctaa.org/join.
Today there is never-before-seen complexity in the non-emergency medical transportation field. Limited funding combined with growing patient loads has states seeking intermediaries that can control costs through competition. Community and public transportation providers must become efficient, safe, cost-effective and accountable to maintain these important medical transportation services. The Community Transportation Association, in response to requests from its members, is introducing a new initiative this fall — the Competitive Edge — which will give community and public transit providers the tools, resources and benefits they need to make them central players in this new medical transportation environment. Here’s what the Competitive Edge encompasses:

The Competitive Edge Training
CTAA has developed an all-new training course that combines and emphasizes the following topics:

- Value: Determining the true cost of service
- Pricing: Lowering your costs to be competitive
- Negotiation: Winning through persuasion
- Accountability: Building a recordkeeping and reporting process
- Training: Focusing on the patient

Access to the Transit Industry’s Best Resources and Training
You don’t need to have all the answers, you need to have access to them when you need them. Here’s how the Competitive Edge helps:

- Peers and Information Sharing: CTAA will put you in contact with your industry peers, where you can learn from experience
- On-Line Library and Resource Holdings: The most timely resources, news and research, all housed on CTAA’s medical transportation website
- CTAA staff: Our professional staff are always available to offer analysis and insight
- Important training and certification programs such as the Certified Safety and Security Manager, PASS Driver Certification, and the soon-to-be released Medi-PASS Driver Certification.

Please go to www.ctaa.org/competitiveedge to learn how you can bring the Competitive Edge to your state. As always, CTAA training staff are available to help tailor this new program to your precise needs. Please call Charles Dickson at 202.247.8356 or email dickson@ctaa.org for all the details on this unique opportunity!
At several of our stops to transit providers in Minnesota, we were treated to looks at collections of scrapbooks of news clippings, photos and memorabilia from each system’s history.

During our travels across the state, we also collected a series of photos that help capture the spirit of the places we visited beyond their transit systems – natural settings, quaint local restaurants, hockey landmarks. Click here for our video scrapbook of our time spent in the Land of 10,000 Lakes.