

TRANSIT Times

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Public
Transportation Day,
May 23



WISCONSIN
URBAN & RURAL
TRANSIT ASSOCIATION

Eau Claire Transit Strategic Plan Revives Failing System

A decade ago, Eau Claire Transit was on the verge of extinction. Thanks to the foresight of community leaders, ECT has made a real comeback.

After years of declining ridership, a consultant was hired in 1994 to develop a transit development plan (TDP) to help ECT run efficiently, safely and cost-effectively. The consultant interviewed local residents, business people and other stakeholders about their transit needs. Recommendations from the TDP were implemented in 1997 and included redesigned routes, new fare structures (e.g., student and monthly passes) and a contract with the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire that provided additional bus service to the university and implemented a U-Pass program. Within a year of the system revamp, ridership increased by 50%.

“In 2005, we served over one million passengers for the first time since 1983, and our 2006 ridership increased 2% over 2005,” said Gwen Larson, ECT’s transit manager since 2000. “For the first time in over 30 years, we actually have capacity issues during peak demand.”

Customers and potential customers continue to request more and more service, including later hours, Sunday service, extended service areas and more route frequency. Transit, Larson noted, is not a static situation. “It is changing all the time.”

The TDP is a working document that helps keep ECT on track. Larson plays a key role, working with the city planner and city engineer to review city development plans and zoning requests. They ensure that new facilities – from retail businesses to senior housing – are located near a bus route, are accessible to a bus and if not, that the city understands the economic impact if transit cannot serve the new development. Alternately, the city sometimes asks developers to pick up additional transit costs.



“We still face a budget crisis in 2008 as the City of Eau Claire struggles to meet our local share in light of levy limits and shared revenue losses,” Larson said. “Fare increases are inevitable, and growth is likely to be impossible in the near future.” She is hoping to maintain current service levels, a frustration as passengers and community members demand more service.

“The city greatly values the transit system, and we understand that a healthy, stable community needs a strong public transportation network,” said Mike Huggins, Eau Claire city manager. “Unfortunately, the failure of state transit aids to keep pace with inflation, the sharp reduction of state shared revenues, and the recent tax levy limits have shifted a significant financial burden to the local taxpayer.”

He added that the city supports proposed regional transit authority (RTA) legislation with a dedicated funding source for local governments “that will allow our transit system to expand to meet growing demand. Linking Chippewa Valley municipalities through public transportation will help create a more robust regional economy and benefit all of western Wisconsin.”

Three new legislators were recently elected

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From One Generation to the Next: The Re-emergence of RTAs

By Gary R. Goyke, WURTA Legislative Consultant

Mark May 23 on your calendar. The day will bring Wisconsin to the threshold of the next generation in public transportation.

A powerful consortium – including the Wisconsin Alliance of Cities, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, the Wisconsin Counties Association and the Wisconsin Urban and Rural Transit Association – will

unveil proposed legislation that redefines the parameters of existing regional transit authority (RTA) statutes during Public Transportation Day at the Capitol.

This proposal brings to the forefront the most critical characteristics for the success of this next generation of public transportation: collaboration and revenue sourcing.

When existing statutes were written many years ago, cooperation was not politically realistic and funding was simply not addressed. But times have changed, reflecting contemporary attitudes and opinions, current demands and needs.

The new generation RTA is backed by local governments, professional transportation providers, representatives of the elderly and disabled, as well as business, environmental, medical, education and other community leaders, who recognize that transit goes beyond traditional political boundaries.

With determination and commitment, they are taking leadership roles to address this public policy debate; they endorse the establishment of an innovative “menu” of transportation choices to help local governments remove barriers to providing service for and meeting the evolving needs of their residents.

Join Us

We urge the Governor, all Legislators, and their staffs, to participate in this historic Public Transportation Day in the Capitol Rotunda on Wednesday, May 23. The agenda includes:

- 11 a.m. – Press conference to introduce the proposed Regional Transit Authority legislation.
- Noon – An official ceremony, featuring Secretary Frank Busalacchi and other transportation notables.
- 1 p.m. – A public hearing of the Senate Transportation Committee to discuss the proposal (Room 411 South).
- 10 a.m.-2 p.m. – Representatives of more than 25 state and local transportation organizations will be in the Rotunda to discuss transportation issues from a local and statewide perspective.

Your involvement is needed to help support these new directions and make these forward-looking changes a reality.

High Time to Step up Funding

By Gwen Larson, WURTA Chair

These are wonderful but challenging times for public transportation in Wisconsin.

Transit ridership has been increasing at a rapid rate statewide. In fact, demand for transit service in Wisconsin is the greatest it's been in 30 years! Thanks in great part to higher gasoline prices, people are looking for alternatives to driving their personal vehicles. “Choice” riders are turning to mass transit like never before.

As our population ages, more and more older adults, who are either unable to drive or choose not to drive, are relying on public transit. As Baby Boomers age and live longer than previous generations, that demand will only grow.

In addition, most municipalities with a state university have contracted for additional bus service with low or free fares for students and faculty to alleviate parking and traffic congestion.

Public transportation is a great investment. A Wisconsin DOT study reported that every \$1 spent on transit in Wisconsin yields a \$3 return on the investment. It links our community members to jobs, education and healthcare facilities, improving the economic viability of our communities.

Yet, the state's contribution to transit funding has not kept pace. In 1994, the state subsidized 43% of the operating cost for transit systems. By 2006, that figure had dropped to just

27%. This drop, combined with state-imposed levy limits and cuts to shared revenue – not to mention increased costs for fuel and other expenses – have led to many service reductions and/or significant fare increases for most of our transit systems. Just when the public is demanding more service, we are being forced to cut service and raise fares.

Demand for public transit service is at an all-time high. WURTA advocates a strong commitment to increased transit funding from the state to meet that demand. Adequate funding is needed to assist transit systems throughout the state with operating costs, capital needs and the formation of regional transit authorities (RTAs).

We must invest in the well-being of Wisconsin and its citizens!

Gwen Larson has been the Transit Manager for the City of Eau Claire for seven years. Over the previous seven years, she worked with rural and urban public transit systems in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Larson, who served on the WURTA Executive Board for four years, is the current chairperson.



Petrowski Tackles Transportation Challenges

Rep. Jerry Petrowski (R – 86th District) is getting his chance to explore his interest “in the whole realm of transportation issues – everything from building roads to building infrastructure, growing our economy, creating jobs.”

As the newly appointed chair of the Assembly Committee on Transportation, where he has served as a member since his election in 1998 and as co-chairman last session, Petrowski says, “I look forward to improving the transportation infrastructure and its services.”

The Assembly Speaker has combined all transportation-related matters under the Transportation Committee this session. That means Petrowski will oversee a broader scope of issues – rail, aviation, public transit, highway safety, even bike trails – “anything associated with moving people and accessibility.”

“It will be a real challenge to address all the needs within transportation, including the needs of public transit,” he says.

A personal link to transit

Growing up in Stettin, outside Wausau, Petrowski took public transit to school.

“I also spent a lot of time with my elderly grandmother. She didn’t drive, so we rode the bus together to go into town – to the doctor, grocery shopping, paying bills,” he recalls.

“Like for my grandmother, public transit really makes a difference in the lives of many people. It allows access and mobility. Without a car, they’re really limited on where they go and what they can do.”

Petrowski cites many other benefits to public transit: it reduces congestion and pollution, saves on fuel/reduces our dependence on foreign oil, allows people to get to work, promotes the economy and, for the most part, is cost-effective.

Although he calls public transit a priority in the state’s overall transportation system, Petrowski adds, “I’m not going to say it’s more of a priority than some of the other needs within transportation. We have to address the needs that absolutely must be taken care of, along with long-term planning, in a way that makes the most common sense.”

Funding issues

One of his top priorities is protecting the state Transportation Fund. “That money needs to be used as it was intended. There was a commitment made years ago to the people of the state – that gas tax and license and registration fees would go to meet transportation needs, not used for other purposes.”

Over the past two budgets, he notes, a lot of money was taken out of the Trans-

portation Fund to be used for other things. Now, in this budget, the governor is proposing that the Transportation Fund pay the debt service on those dollars, increasing the pressure on transit budgets.

“I know that public transit people would probably like to see larger increases in funding than [proposed in the governor’s budget] because they are down somewhat from where they were years ago due to increased costs and decreased funding,” Petrowski says. “There are many needs and only a limited amount of dollars.”

Indeed, there is much work to be done to keep transit rolling in Wisconsin.



Petrowski also serves on the Governor’s Council on Highway Safety and the Department of Transportation’s Law Enforcement Advisory Council, and has served on the Assembly Committees on Agriculture, State Affairs, Natural Resources and Military Affairs. He can be reached at Rep.petrowski@legis.wisconsin.gov.

Eau Claire Transit

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in the ECT service area: Sen. Kathleen Vinehout, Sen. Pat Kreitlow and Rep. Jeff Smith. “We look forward to working with these new officials, as well as our old friend, Rep. Terry Moulton, on transit issues in the Chippewa Valley,” Larson said. “The Eau Claire Transit Commission and the City of Eau Claire are dedicated to pursuing the formation of a Chippewa Valley RTA, and we believe our legislators will be of great assistance in our pursuit.”

ECT Vital Statistics (2006)

Service Area Population:
69,300 (Cities of Eau Claire & Altoona)

No. of Bus Routes:
11 regular and
4 school express routes

No. of Employees:
40.5 FTE

Fleet:
16 30-ft. and 6 40-ft. buses

Peak Fleet Demand:
15 buses

Passenger Trips:
1,030,374

Revenue Miles:
687,963

Cost per Trip:
\$3.04

ECT

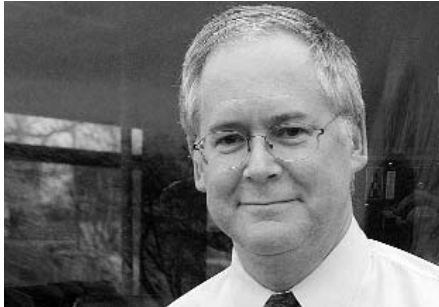




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Transit Veterans Take on New Roles

Chuck Kamp has taken the reins as general manager for Madison's Metro Transit system, bringing extensive experience from his 15 years as GM of Appleton's Valley Transit.



Kamp recalls taking the bus as a youth in Dayton, Ohio, fostering a sense of independence and responsibility. As an intern at the U.S. Department of Transportation in Washington, D.C., he worked in the highway, railroad and transit areas. "Transit reinforced my childhood image of how communities should be built," he said.

"Madison is a community where my skills and passion for transit can be combined to good use," where the leadership and culture focus on the positive role transit plays in shaping a healthier community, Kamp said.

Kamp received a B.S. in public administration and policy from Oakland University, Rochester, Mich., and a master's degree in public policy from the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor. He currently serves as the WURTA legisla-

tive committee chair and is a former chairperson.

Deborah Wetter is the new general manager for Valley Transit in Appleton. With more than 30 years of transportation industry experience, she most recently served as director of industry relations for Veolia Transportation in Oak Brook, Ill.

Wetter also has served as GM of Amtrak's Gulf Coast Business Group – New Orleans, La.; executive manager of external affairs for the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) District – Oakland, Calif.; and deputy director of marketing and service development for the Santa Clara County Transportation Agency – San Jose, Calif. She earned her bachelor's



degree in government and international affairs from Radcliffe College (a part of Harvard University) and her master's degree in business administration from Darden Graduate Business School at the University of Virginia. Wetter grew up in Wausau, Wis.

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www.wisconsintransit.org

for more extensive information on the state's public transportation systems and providers. The site is an excellent resource for consumers, policymakers and others interested in the transit industry. You'll also find archives of the WURTA *Transit Times*, charts on the business of transit and other useful information.

Visit us on Public Transportation Day

Please join us between 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Wednesday, May 23, for Public Transportation Day at the Capitol. Representatives of more than 25 state and local transportation organizations will be on hand in the First Floor Rotunda to celebrate excellence in Wisconsin transit. Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi will be part of a ceremony at noon. Members of transit systems, unions and affiliated transportation groups will be available to answer questions about the state of transit in Wisconsin. See Gary Goyke's article (page 2) for more information.

