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Advocacy Groups Tackle Transit

By Leslie Davis

Twenty years ago, St. Louis did not have a rail line. While the local government and the public alike knew a better transit system was needed in the city, they were resistant to the then-novel mode of transit. But, through the work of a dedicated group of citizens, MetroLink opened its first light rail line in 1993.

"People had visions of choo-choo trains going through their yards," says Tom Shrout, executive director of Citizens for Modern Transit (CMT). "We really had to educate people and let them know what rail was about."



The organization created an active speakers' bureau that spent a good deal of time speaking to Rotary clubs, Kiwanis clubs, Boy Scout troops and similar organizations about the basics of light rail and how it would affect the community. Shrout says the organization's members knew that, before any new mode of transit was put into place in the city, the public had to be behind it. "It had to happen among the citizens of St. Louis, and not among the transit agency," he says.

The object of advocacy

CMT is one of dozens of grassroots transit advocacy groups across the country working to improve the state of transit in their communities. While many are concerned with such operational matters as on-time performance and the upkeep of stations, others have been able to affect major changes in the type of transit offered in their areas. Doing that not only means getting the public onboard, but also building a good professional relationship with the local transit agency.

CMT works more closely today with its local transit agency, Metro, than it did initially, Shrout says. It now completes independent surveys of customer satisfaction, monitors the on-time performance of buses and has volunteers inspect light rail stations. "The agency has responded to our analysis of where they are," Shrout says. "They've even incorporated results of the surveys into their employee evaluations."

Shrout admits that Metro officials were a bit skeptical when CMT first began its critiques of the system, but says the agency now tries to be supportive about the evaluations. "This is not adversarial at all," he says. "We're the agency's allies politically. We want some of the same things they want — expansion, funding, earmarks."

Educating the public is one of the major roles transit advocacy groups play, whether it's letting them know about a new mode or showing them the benefits of using transit. Shrout says CMT found success with the public when it reintroduced to middle-class residents the importance of transit. "It was viewed as being for the indigent and disabled, but now they see it can be important in their lives as well," he says.

Overall, Shroul says transit in St. Louis isn't bad, but it definitely has its to make a reverse commute, you have huge problems," Shroul says. "But that's a problem bigger than the transit agency. That gets into land use and development."

A political agenda

Though a relatively young advocacy group, Citizens for a Sensible Transportation Solution in Tucson, Ariz., was thrown into the political arena fairly quickly. When it began in 2001, it was looking to enact a balanced transportation plan that included all modes.

In 2002, the organization actively campaigned against the city's proposed road tax that would have destroyed all transit in Tucson. Voters rejected the city's plan 70–30. "We did a good job of making legitimate criticisms of the plan," says Joy E. Herr-Cardillo, a member of the organization's steering committee. "We offered an alternative we thought was more visionary."

That alternative included an increase in transportation-dedicated sales tax, a construction sales tax, light rail, increased bus service and more bike lanes. Citizens received enough signatures to get its proposal on the ballot, but not enough votes to win. "If we had the money and ability to reach more people, we could have won it," Herr-Cardillo says.

"It was a huge challenge getting cities to recognize the benefits of light rail," she continues. "But we had huge support in the cities that would be most affected." Those cities basically said they would be willing to tax themselves to have light rail realized in Tucson, and Citizens took that opportunity to suggest to the city a special taxing district. The city was intrigued by the concept, and is now working on an analysis that would include the installation of a modern streetcar.

"We haven't abandoned rail, but this is a nice demonstration project to see what light rail looks like," Herr-Cardillo says. "It may be the ultimate outgrowth of all of our work. We lost the election, but we're still kind of winning." Herr-Cardillo says one of the keys to a good advocacy campaign is visuals. The organization has had great success with a short video on light rail, and was also able to gather a lot of signatures for its petition by displaying a Bombardier train from Minnesota's Hiawatha Light Rail line. "The biggest challenge is getting people to open their minds," she says. "Once they do, we are very effective at changing their minds."

Herr-Cardillo says the organization, which is operated by volunteers and only has minimal funding, has definitely seen progress since it's been around. "It's no longer a debate about if we want to make more of an investment in transit. That battle has been won," she says. "The debate is how are we going to do it and fund it."

Promoting an idea

The Baldwin County Public Transit Coalition (PTC) in Robertsdale, Ala., formed six years ago after seeing deficiencies in personal mobility and problems getting welfare-to-work recipients to work. "Barriers stood in their way to getting employment," says Stan Virden, president of the coalition. "And transportation was the overwhelming problem."

As a certified public charity, the organization is not allowed to lobby, but can educate the public about the need for a good transit system. "We talk with public officials and business people about transit and why it plays an important role in the overall transit infrastructure," Virden says. "We make people aware that the problem exists and that various solutions also exist."

The Baldwin County PTC works very closely with its local transit agency, Baldwin Rural Area Transportation Services (BRATS), and the director of the agency even sits on the coalition's board. "BRATS has one of the most superbly run demand-response services," Virden says. "But it does not provide much in the way of scheduled routes. That's a service Baldwin County desperately needs."

Initially, the PTC kept the BRATS director from joining its board so there would be no conflict of interest, but the current director has joined. "We're devoted to promoting an idea, we're not devoted to BRATS," Virden says. "If something better than BRATS comes along, we'd be happy to promote it."

Virden says the main goal of the Baldwin County PTC is to "educate anybody we can talk to." The organization is still trying to figure out a way to raise money for a full-blown educational campaign, and still largely works through word of mouth by speaking at Rotary, Kiwanis and American Association of

Retired Persons meetings. “Anytime anybody wants to talk about the subject, we’re there,” he says. “We’ve got a lot of people talking about the problem, which wasn’t happening six years ago.”

Viriden says he usually receives a positive response when he gives talks on transit, though there are always a few naysayers in the crowd. “The majority of people react with enthusiasm and an open mind,” he says. “Part of the question is reaching enough people and keeping them excited.”



Becoming an expert

The Transit Coalition in Southern California has had success with getting people excited and seeing changes instituted. When the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) proposed to remove some bus service in the San Fernando Valley to the detriment of riders, the coalition took action. It worked to enhance alternatives to the proposed cuts, and sent out brochures to get citizens to attend the MTA’s public meeting on the subject. More than 100 people turned out based on the coalition’s outreach.

“We didn’t get everything we wanted, but we stopped the majority of the proposals,” says Bart Reed, executive director of the coalition.

An ongoing project for the coalition is creating a regional rail network that goes beyond what the MTA currently has in place and would link to the Metrolink service. The idea is to have a one-seat, high-speed rail ride that emulates the freeway system. The organization is also very active in advocating extensions for most of the rail lines in the area.

Reed says he is frequently called to act as a transit spokesperson and provide expertise on transit in Southern California. Though he did not have a career in transit, he has spent many years closely observing how it works. “When you live and breathe something, you become an expert,” he says.

While educating the public is important to the success of any advocacy group, Reed also underscores the importance of building a relationship with government officials and educating them. “An educated elected official can be sensitive to the needs of the community,” he says.

Reed believes his relationship with the local transit agencies is a good one. The coalition is still trying to convince the MTA of the benefits of gradual fare increases, but Reed says he hasn’t gotten them to see that point. “People will pay for what they have, or a little more to preserve what they have,” he says. “Transit agencies have long not understood the psychology of the public, and that’s one of our goals.”

Eventually, Reed says, the coalition does get its way on issues, but it often takes time. “It’s not instant gratification,” he says. “It takes long-term planning to get institutions to change.”

A national network

Transit advocacy groups can come in all shapes and sizes, and almost no two are the same. The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) has worked to link these groups into a national network so they have a forum to discuss coalition building and advocacy techniques. Through the association’s National Alliance of Public Transportation Advocates (NAPTA), more than 400 coalitions representing over 25,000 members and 41 states have access to resources they may not have otherwise had.

“We really wanted to cultivate our relationships with coalitions around the country,” says Art Guzzetti, APTA’s director of policy and advocacy, who oversees NAPTA. It has done this by offering grant money

to advocacy groups, sending top-notch trainers to teach the art of advocacy, offering use of the (PT)2 advocacy materials and helping organizations create advocacy action plans. “We want to make sure these groups are well-versed in the art of advocacy. A lot of them, and they will admit this themselves, are not working as effectively as they might.”

To obtain a grant (the maximum of which is \$5,000), advocacy groups are required to work in concert with their local transit authority. As part of the application process, the authority is required to submit a letter stating the nature of the relationship. Guzzetti says that most transit agencies are supportive of advocacy groups, especially when they look at them as a partner in building a stronger transit network.

“The coalitions represent users and riders,” Guzzetti notes. “Most transit agencies have these relationships now, and they are remiss if they don’t.”

Guzzetti stresses the importance of transit advocacy groups working in partnership with transit agencies. “It shouldn’t be their purpose to take on the transit system,” he says. “They have to have a strategy, a goal for everything they do. The worst thing a coalition can do is just complain.”

Guzzetti points to the large number of transit referendums that passed last year and credits the coalitions in helping to make that happen. “In a lot of the referendum races, the local coalitions worked tremendously hard,” he says.

“There is no doubt that the success [of the referendums] was tied in large part to efforts of the local coalitions.”

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