2004 Ohio Public Transit Conference Bridges Technology and Customer Service
by Dave Seech

There was a common theme to the 2004 Ohio Public Transit Conference and Trade Show held in Columbus on June 2 and 3, 2004, Ohio’s transit industry must focus on customer service and new technology to survive. Clearly, Ohio is facing some of the most difficult funding decisions in recent years and Ohio’s transit systems must fight for state transit funding. It’s more important than ever to inform state legislators that transit makes a difference. Transit systems need to focus on excellent customer service, improve system efficiency with new technology, and keep everyone involved.

Improving marketing, operations, human resources, management, and transportation coordination with the newest technology was the focus of the conference. Perhaps the most important message a transit system can send to its local state legislator is that its services are important to their constituents’ quality of life. Transit advocates need to prove to Ohio’s Legislature that reductions in funding for public transit equate to a loss in essential transportation services to Ohio voters. The conference agenda reinforced this message and here are some highlights:

- Gordon Proctor, ODOT Director, described ODOT’s efforts to communicate the benefits of public transportation to Ohio’s Legislature for the upcoming budget cycle.
- Carla Cefaratti, ODOT Deputy Director, recognized the 19 transportation coordination projects, for “making a difference in peoples lives” through increased human service agency transportation coordination in their communities. Later, in a breakout session, Carla participated in a panel discussion with representatives of the transit industry and social service agencies on Ohio’s coordination effort and the Federal Government’s commitment to the effort.
- Rick Ayish, OPTA Government Relations Council, described his efforts to fight for transit every day and encouraged increased partnerships between transit systems and their legislators.
- John Drew, PARTA General Manager, energized the audience with his passion for transit and helping people.
- The Transit - “It’s a Sweet Deal” Ohio General Assembly Luncheon was a great opportunity to start the ball rolling on getting legislative support for transit.

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• The Operations breakout sessions featured innovative technologies to provide transit customers with real time information on vehicle location and to make transit service more safe and secure.
• The Marketing breakout sessions provided best practices for improving communication to transit customers.
• David D. Freel, Executive Director of the Ohio Ethics Commission, presented the framework of Ohio ethics laws and the impact on all public employees.
• Kelly Mooney, author of The Ten Demandments...Rules to Live By in the Age of the Demanding Customer, provided an excellent presentation on effectively responding to customer needs and expectations.
• At the awards luncheon, some ordinary people doing extraordinary work for the transit industry were recognized. Please see the list of winners below.

Overall, the conference was a great success and reminded everyone that we must continue to improve. It’s up to us to prove that public transportation is an important and crucial component in people’s lives.

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**AWARD** | **AWARDEE**
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Leonard Ronis Excellence in Transit | Seneca County Agency Transportation Linda Good, Executive Director
Friends of Transit | Sidney City Councilman Mark Copeland and Shelby County Commissioner Larry Kleinhans
Driver of the Year | Ephraim “Joe” Martinez (Chillicothe Transit System)
Rural System | Steve Carpenter (Newark-Heath Taxi Token Program)
Driver of the Year | Sheryl Symons (Akron METRO Regional Transit Authority)
Small Urban System | Akron METRO Regional Transit Authority “On The Right Track” Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad Molly Becker, Director of Communications and Marketing
Large Urban System | Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority “Rack-N-Roll” Steve Bitto, Director of Marketing
Best Marketing Campaign on a Shoestring | www.sartaonline.com - Stark Area Regional Transit Authority
Best Special Event | Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority “Wild, Wacky Wednesday” - Dave Etienne, Communications Project Supervisor
Best Website | www.sartaonline.com
Best Print Brochure | ODOT Transit Employee of the Year Brett Harris, Urban Program Coordinator
The Truths of Financial Management
by Rosamary Amiet

April 28-30, 2004, Brian McCollom, McCollom Management Company, and Robbie Sarles, RLS and Associates, presented Fundamentals of Financial Management to a standing room only audience of Ohio small urban and rural transit systems. Brian and Robbie, two of the premier trainers in the transit industry today, shared the importance of sound financial management practices to a transit system’s overall health. Some might say that the ‘truth’ of financial management might have been over emphasized—I don’t think that’s possible. Gone are the days of unlimited budgets and government bail outs. Gone is our assumption that people will do the right thing, because situations and circumstances sometimes prevent that, even for the best of people. The reality and truth of financial management has to not only be emphasized, perhaps ‘preached,’ but it must be accepted and practiced. Here is an excerpt of the “truths” that Brian and Robbie shared during the April training.

1. Good financial management is more than budgeting and invoicing.

2. You can’t spend money you don’t have (a simple, but important concept).

3. In order not to spend more money than you have, you must establish, and maintain, good records.

4. Just because you have checks in your checkbook, it doesn’t mean you have money in your bank account (again, a simple but important concept).

5. Money is finite—it doesn’t just keep coming and coming.

6. Fraud, theft, and mismanagement can happen anywhere. Be vigilant and don’t discount even a hint of wrong doing. In the end, the reputation you could be defending may be your own.

7. ODOT cannot bail you out. The State transit budget has declined 60% in the last four years. Additional funding will not be an option in the near future.

8. Just because the Mayor, City, or County, asks for something, doesn’t mean you can afford to do it. Know when to say yes, and when to say no.

9. Transit cannot be all things to all people (see #8).

10. Your revenues must equal (or exceed) your expenses (See #s 1-9).

Although the above is written tongue in cheek, it does not diminish the importance of each of the truth-isms. A good transit manager is only as good as his or her financial management skills. If this isn’t your strength, find someone who is strong in this area to support you. And, if you didn’t attend the ODOT April training, make a point to attend it next time it’s offered.

PT Patter
by Dave Seech

• Lynn Cary was named the new Executive Director of the Allen County Regional Transit Authority on July 1, 2004. Lynn has worked at ACRTA for over 24 years and previously held the position of Financial Manager. Congratulations and good luck Lynn!

• Kristina Fenselon is the new director of Geauga County Transit. She has worked for the public transportation system for seven years. Since April 2001, she has served as manager of financial services and administration. Congratulations Kristina!

• ODOT Office of Transit’s Lynn Rathke was promoted from Special Projects Coordinator to Public Transit Manager on June 28, 2004. Lynn has worked in ODOT’s Office of Transit for eight years and prior to ODOT with the Central Ohio Transit Authority for eight years. Congratulations Lynn!

• Max Wheaton became the new Transportation Director of the Ottawa County Transportation Agency on July 1, 2004. Max was previously the Assistant Director of the system and recently moved to Ohio from San Diego, CA. where he coordinated school pupil transportation. Congratulations and good luck Max!

• ODOT sends its condolences to the family and friends of Judy Circelli, Perry County Transit Transportation Coordinator, who died on Saturday, July 3, 2004, from complications after surgery. Judy started as a driver in 1985 when the transit system began and became Transportation Coordinator in 1995. Judy was a long time transit advocate and a good friend to many people.

• Michael Setzer, general manager of the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority in Cincinnati from 1987 to 1993, returned to the system as its chief executive officer and general manager on July 1, 2004. Setzer has more than 30 years of transit management experience, and previously served as general manager of Metro Transit in Minneapolis/ St. Paul. He also has served as general manager of the Bi-State Development Agency in St. Louis and the South Bend, Indiana, Public Transportation Corporation. Welcome back Michael.

• Stark Area Regional Transit Authority’s Deborah Hill has been promoted from Grants Coordinator to Accounting Manager. Congratulations Deborah!
What a Ride I’ve Had!
by Carole Grapner

Let me begin by saying that I will truly miss all of my friends in the transit industry! What a “Ride” I’ve had! I began this adventure as a secretary at the Allen County Regional Transit Authority in Lima. I was hired in 1975 and began learning what public transportation really meant. I was promoted to an Administrative Assistant and was later named as the Executive Director in May of 1978. One of my interview questions before they hired me was, “do you know what public transit is”? I must admit that I had to say no and I was hired anyway! Thank you, John! I will always be grateful, for this has been one of the most rewarding careers that I can even imagine. It didn’t take me long to feel a real passion for what we do and what transit is all about. When passengers come up and tell you that they just don’t know what they would do without this service, you know that you have to keep doing the very best you can so they can have a better quality of life and remain independent. I will miss the interaction with our passengers.

I have been blessed with a wonderful five member Board (some have changed over the years) but all have believed in me and supported me in so many ways. My staff and employees are the very best and we are truly a team, working together to make Allen County RTA the best small transit system in the State! My employees are like family and I will truly miss the friendships I have and I want to thank them for accepting me and my way of operating the RTA. Sure there have been a few bumps in the road but we have always moved beyond any obstacle and have grown in spirit from it and become better. There are so many people in the transit industry that have guided me, advised me, challenged me and supported me along the way. I can’t even begin to name them all but I want to thank ODOT’s “supportive” staff, FTA’s staff and all my fellow transit managers in the State. I would be remiss if I didn’t also tell all of you that I have a wonderful husband and family that has been there for me always and has been my strength through some of the trying times, always believing in me, and always loving me. In closing, I have to say that I will always support public transit programs (especially in Lima) and it has been the “ride of my life.” Thank you, thank you, thank you each and every person that touched my life and helped me in any way over the past 29 years. As I enter a new phase of my life, I will not soon forget all of the people that have made a difference in my life. May God Bless You All as I have been so richly blessed by having you cross my path along the way.

Taking High Tech to High Touch
Laketran’s New Marketing Solution
by Dave Seech

Laketran is on the right track to gaining a better understanding of their customers’ needs and providing practical, innovative transit service through a new marketing initiative. This new initiative was presented jointly by Laketran and Risetime, Laketran’s Information Technology consultant, at the June Transit Conference. Here’s an overview of the innovative program.

The Challenge

Board Support – Laketran needed help making Trustees understand Marketing’s integral relationship with Operations and Finance.

Know Thy Customer – Laketran needed demographic information and consistent survey forms to assess customer service.

Respond to Declining Ridership – Laketran needed rider-driven information to develop initiatives to arrest the decline in ridership.
Economic Efficiency – Laketran needed to better use technology to maximize the efficiency of staff time. Budget Constraints – The declining dollars allocated to Marketing required the best use to target markets. Survey Inefficiency – In 2001, Laketran received a total of 391 surveys without demographic information about their riders.

The Solution
Laketran implemented a Business Intelligence solution to prepare the appropriate messages and use the best marketing instruments to get the message out to their customers, collect meaningful demographic information on who really rides their system, and improve the rate of return of surveys.

Laketran borrowed survey design concepts from the Delaware Transit Corporation and segmented their survey to focus on three main areas: you, your travel, and your thoughts about us. Laketran also changed the method of distribution in two out of three service types: Dial-a-Ride was direct mailed to 9,696 passengers in the database; 344 commuters boarding on June 24, 2003, were personally handed a survey; and local fixed route surveys were handed out by drivers over a three-day period.

The Results
The results were dramatic. The survey response rate more than quadrupled from 2001. Laketran received a total of 1,864 returned surveys with useful demographic information about their customers. Laketran is using the improved data to develop a marketing plan that should be more responsive to fluctuations in ridership and to the rider’s interests. The improved marketing program and survey provided Laketran with focus and direction.

The analytic survey solution not only allowed Laketran management to immediately analyze a significant number of survey results, but also enabled a user friendly fact-based decision making process. Here are some of the reported benefits of the marketing initiative:

- Provided meaningful factual data allowing for improved decision making
- Increased ridership (double digit increases in some services)
- Improved analysis and planning capabilities
- Turned raw data into useful knowledge
- Automation of reporting, saving time and money.
How Do You Make Your Service Accessible?

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law, mandating accessibility requirements for transportation providers. Here are some useful tips for making your transit system more accessible.

1. Acquire accessible vehicles in accordance with DOT regulations.
2. Ensure that transportation facilities are accessible according to DOT regulations and Access Board guidelines.
4. Establish a system of regular and frequent wheelchair lift maintenance checks. A vehicle with an inoperative lift should be taken out of service, unless there is no spare vehicle available.
5. Accommodate all common wheelchairs and their users. This accommodation includes providing a securement system for wheelchairs and providing assistance with the use of securement systems, ramps or lifts as needed or requested.
6. Permit service animals to accompany passengers with disabilities.
7. Train all personnel in the use of accessibility features and in the proper assistance and treatment of individuals with disabilities. This training should be to the degree of proficiency that is appropriate to each employee’s duties.
8. Provide schedules and other information in alternative formats.
9. Accommodate passengers traveling with respirators or portable oxygen supply systems.
10. Allow any individual with a disability to use the lift or ramp to enter a vehicle upon their request, provided this equipment conforms to current Access Board standards.

**Source:** Making a Transit Service Accessible, RTAP National Transit Resource Center, Technical Assistance Brief Number 9

For further information about ADA accessibility, call the RTAP Transit Hotline at (800) 527-8729, or access the National Easter Seal Society’s Project ACTION website at [www.projectaction.org](http://www.projectaction.org). We also encourage you to contact your ODOT Office of Transit representative as issues arise.

“**These photos were taken at Camp Sue Osborn in Lake County - a summer camp experience for children with disabilities. Laketrans drivers love transporting the kids to and from camp. Their smiles are priceless.**”
Reflections on a Job Well Done in Ottawa County
by Rosan Allen

Leaving my position as Director for Ottawa County Transportation Agency, I am filled with conflicting emotions. For the past four years, I have had a countdown clock on my desk at home - 1,460 days seemed as though it would take forever. The days have ticked by and on June 30, I leave the familiar and enter a rather vague future known as ‘retirement’. For nearly 20 years, I have planned to retire to Florida. I set the objectives to meet that goal and they are accomplished. Beyond that, I have not planned my future. As a surprise to me, my daughter wrote a very long ROSAN RETIRES story in one of our local newspapers - front page two weeks in a row! She has a plan for me and I’d like to quote her:

“I heard an old-timer say recently that OCTA is the best thing to happen in Ottawa County in a generation. The solid team that my mom has put together there, soon to be led by a terrifyingly-capable and fully-trained Max Wheaton, is prepared to grow OCTA until there is no longer any unmet need for transportation in Ottawa County. It’s proving to be not so easy for her to turn over the reins, but she’ll do it. Her legacy is secure and now she gets to retire.”

“Some have said that Rosan will be bored in Florida - retirement being a whole lot of nothing and all. They don’t know my Mom. I figure she will have a new project before the year is out. Like fixing the Social Security system so that I, who didn’t inherit a talent for handling money, won’t have to live out my senior years as a pauper in the streets. Or reforming the education system so my youngest brother Tim can spend his days teaching children instead of fighting school administrators over how to implement silly government policies. Or establishing world peace so that my Navy brother Paul will never again be sent into harm’s way overseas. Whatever she takes up next, you can bet she’ll be brilliant at it. And you can bet that her kids and a lot of other people’s kids will be better off because she did.”

In 2002, ODOT Office of Transit hired RLS & Associates to work with OCTA to create a transition plan. The Ottawa County Transit Board took the initiative to hire an Assistant Director last summer to train with me for almost a year so the transition would be seamless. Max Wheaton, a native of Ottawa County, Ohio and a 25-year resident of San Diego, California, heard about the position from our County Economic Development Director. He and his family had decided to move back to small town America and this was an ideal opportunity. Max has school transportation experience and quickly adapted to public transit. From 500 buses to 20 vans of assorted sizes was the easy part. What has been hard is “the director has to know so much about everything!” The system he came from had lots of office personnel that were experts in their own area - sounds like the Big Guys in Ohio, doesn’t it? OCTA also has many other very competent staff that will assure on-going success.

Working with the staff of the Office of Transit has been the most pleasant experience of my career. They are state employees that REALLY are there to help us. They do not want transit systems to fail and do whatever they can to assure we are successful. Their passion for moving people equals those of us at the local level. I will miss them as well as the friendly and helpful transit managers around Ohio. All are so ready to pitch in and help rookies whenever asked. My work here is done. I wish all of you only the best as the years go forward and the numbers needing transportation grow. My adopted state of Florida and the county I will be living in have a wonderful public transit system that I will be using. It is, however, lacking in ice cream shops. I just might have to do something about that. I’ll let the younger generation solve the bigger issues.

Thank you to all of my friends and colleagues for your calls, notes, and gifts in honor of my retirement. I so appreciate your help and support over the years and enjoyed working with you these last 31+ years. Where did the time go?? My best to each of you!

Sincerely,
Rosamary