



Changes in mass transit reflect the shifting needs of riders

by Diane Schenk

Much has been made about Americans' love of the automobile, but there is little doubt that many parts of the Midwestern region need a vital public transportation system. A rise in gas prices is the latest development that has made mass transit a logical alternative for many people. In fact, for the first time since World War II, the use of buses and trains in this country has increased at a higher rate than cars over the last five years (21 percent to 11 percent), a recent Surface Transportation Policy Project found.

Above all other reasons, the rise in mass transit may most be attributed to an improvement and expansion of public transportation systems.

"We are finding more and more people who will make use of a good transit system," Wisconsin Rep. Jeff Stone, chair of the state Assembly's Transportation Committee, says. "It creates more options for people and will be very necessary as we move forward [with future transportation decisions]."

For some sectors of the population, public transportation is not merely a choice; it is essential.

"As the state has tried to encourage more welfare moms back into the workforce, we know that one of the biggest challenges is transportation, so if we can provide good transit options for those folks to get to work, I think there is a much greater chance for them to enter the workforce successfully," Stone adds.

Several initiatives in the region demonstrate innovative approaches to mass transit. In the Detroit area, the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) offers people with new employment free bus fare for at least a month through its "Get a Job, Get a Ride" program. SMART also has a phone line that plays a recorded message listing jobs available along its bus route.

The suburban transit system's new services reflect changes seen in Detroit and other Midwestern cities: more and more businesses are located in outlying areas, while a large potential workforce lives within the city's borders.

"About 75 percent of the jobs are outside of the city, and only 40 percent of the people in the city have transportation," says Democrat Kwame Kilpatrick of Detroit, minority leader in the Michigan House. "It is a necessity here. People need to move to their workplace and also be able to get their kids to school."

Recognizing this trend, the federal government developed the Job Access and Reverse Commute Grants program, which provides up to \$10 million to help states get welfare-to-work participants to jobs. Beyond providing more money, Kilpatrick also believes government must do a better job of coordinating the various types of public transportation available in a given region. He is working on legislation that would

create a regional transportation planning agency for southeast Michigan. "This will never be a world-class region until we get an effective and efficient mass transit system," he adds.

The Chicago area's suburban transit system, Pace, has created the second largest vanpool program in the country.

The initiative is viewed as an important part of efforts to get welfare recipients and homeless individuals into the workforce. The Vanpool Incentive Program has 316 vans on the road daily.

Effectively transporting parents to work is only one way public transportation officials are trying to improve services. Milwaukee County also has begun tackling the issue of affordable and reliable child care transportation after surveys indicated that many families were paying as much as \$10 per day for child care transportation.

In June 1999, the county began its W-2 Childcare Transportation Project to reduce excessive commute times and enhance the prospects for long-term job retention and advancement among the county's low-income families.

In its first year, the project served 700 children with free, temporary child care transportation. Although parents are only able to take advantage of this program for up to four months, the group works with families to build a budget. After the four-month period, families are able to transport children at a reduced rate.

The program has grown to serve 1,300 children

each day, but it still turns away eligible users. Transportation Project manager Tom Koehn

estimates that the service only meets half of current demands.

With next year's \$2.5 million budget, \$1.5 million of which will come from the federal government and the state, program officials hope to serve 2,200 children — an increase of 1,000 children, but still less than the area demands.

As with other states, Wisconsin has helped foster improved mass transit services largely through coordination and funding help. For example, the Wisconsin Employment Transportation Assistance Program (WETAP) integrates several state and federal funding sources into one and organizes efforts designed to improve and address local transportation needs.

Rural needs

While Midwestern metropolitan areas have some kind of mass transit system, public transportation is much more scarce in rural areas. For example, the Chicago area has an elaborate public transportation system, but an estimated 40 percent of the state lacks it. Still, the Rides Mass Transit District (known as Rides) — which comprises a nine-county, isolated region in southern Illinois — has successfully provided public transportation to rural residents for more than 25 years. In 2000, it was named the Community Transportation System of America's "System of the Year."

In October 1990, Rides formed the first rural mass transit district in Illinois, allowing it to be self-governed and to have access to the Illinois downstate transportation fund. The transit system also has received a federal Job Access and Reverse Commute grant, allowing it to expand services to include job search, training and child care transportation.

Rides has worked with local departments of human services and other agencies to implement a successful Jobs Access program, which allows the transit system to start new routes to employment sites, training facilities and child care providers. 

