

BusPlus – Creating a Bus Rapid Transit Line in Upstate New York

October 29, 2015 Thursday Morning Roundtable at Drumlins

Speakers:

Ross Farrell, director of planning, [Capital District Transportation Authority](#)

Mario Colone, Program Manager, Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC)

After TMR session, Farrell spoke to OCL study group.

Study co-chair: Heidi Holtz

OCL: Sandra Barrett, Eileen Jevis, Renée K. Gadoua

Attendees: Jim D'Agostino, Mario Colone, Eric Ennis, Tom Carlin, Peter Sarver, Kiva Vandergest, Deborah Hundley, Peter King, Jon Morgan, Lisa Warnecke, Eric Rogers, Megan Costa, Don MacLaughlin, Sarah McIlvain, Annette Krisak

At TMR, **Colone** reviewed SMTC work locally relevant to Capital District's BusPlus transit system. (See notes from June 2, 2015, session on 2014 Syracuse Transit System Analysis and Syracuse Metro Area Regional Transportation Study (SMART).)

Farrell: Study determined Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) the best solution for Capital Region. Moved service to places of greatest demand.

Goals of project: How do you improve transportation for people already dependent on public transit? How do you get people out of their cars?

[Operational Summary](#) (based on statistics compiled April 1, 2014 to March 31, 2015)

- CDTA operates in 50 bus routes in four cities.
- 17M riders a year
- \$79M annual operating budget (budget flat for about five years)
- Vision: 40 miles of BRT.
- One of three lines operating since 2011; second line scheduled for construction in 2017

Albany's system is basic BRT. Hope to upgrade to full BRT, then light rail.

Key to success is branding.

System features wifi, security cameras, transit signal priority, queue jumpers (can save 2-3 minutes/trip - significant), real-time bus information.

Red Line: the first of three planned lines, covers NY 5 corridor, except 3-mile gap.

- Crosses neighborhoods in need of revitalization. (Advanced transit leads to development, a pattern that goes back to Erie Canal days.)
- 3.8M riders a year
- Rollout 4/2011; since then, 28% growth
- Decreased travel time by 20 minutes
- Increased hours and frequency of operation

- Articulated buses (“bendy accordions”) to address overcrowding
- Capital costs: \$25M (Light rail estimated to cost at least \$50M)
- Buses cost \$9M
- Stations and infrastructure: \$17M
- Operating costs: \$2.9M
- Universal access: College employees or students in four counties ride for free with ID (College reimburses CDTA.)
- Can’t develop transportation without changing land use: City of Albany working on Transit-Oriented Development

Purple Line (U Albany color)

- U of Albany likely to make up 40% of ridership
- Portion of project will be full BRT
- U of Albany’s long-term plan reserves spots for future BRT
- 8-mile corridor
- 3.5M riders/year
- Downtown Albany and educational corridor/Crossgates Mall/Harriman Center

Blue Line

- 1.4 miles
- 2.5M riders/year
- Dense urban corridor
- Residential neighborhoods/public housing

Questions

Q: What are funding sources? A: Fares: 25%; 10% from mortgage recording tax; majority from state and federal aid

Q: Has SU included Centro or SMTTC in its new masterplan discussions? A: SMTTC has had “preliminary discussions” with SU

Q: Why not include airport and train station in Albany system? A: Airport is far from dense transit area; limited demand.

Q: How does system help city residents, who often live far from jobs? A: Route restructuring feeders to BRT includes many employment centers. Riders might still have to transfer buses, but the trip is shorter. There are also Park &Rides at BRT stations.

Q: Any parts free? A: Someone has to pay. Universities working with CDTA to offer free rides.

Q: Early/late routes? A: Some expanded service; Purple Line will run 24/7

Q: Environmentally conscious building? A: Integrate solar when possible.

Q. What data shows decreasing car use? A: Ridership is up 25%; have not quantified congestion relief; also hard to assess because new/redevelopment at the same time

Q: Does Syracuse have enough demand for this? Colone: Two corridors in study indicate there is enough density

Q: Polynucleated communities: Difficult to provide transit because of dead zones. Easier when city's density is in one area.

Further comments and questions from OCL session

Farrell: You have to have most capital funds up front. Plan was to run buses every 10 minutes for 24 hours. Couldn't meet that goal, so started smaller. Capital money easier to get than operating funds.

Q: Park & Ride options? Demolishing I81 will create incentive to decrease car use. Centro plans to add Park & Rides. Centro plans to react to state DOT.

Enhanced transit during I81 construction not necessarily what SMART plans long term

To what degree can we capitalize on transition of I81? How can we be proactive rather than reactive?

Q: When did planning in Albany start? A: For Red Line, 10 years ago.

BRT is flexible. Even a station can be moved or adapted quickly (vs. highway plans)

Park & Rides and BRT can work independently.

Commute time in CNY so good that it will be difficult to change mindset. Using Park & Ride adds to commute time.

Utilization of existing Park & Rides is low

Centro does not have to operate BRT

Q: Relationship between transit and land use. A: BRT changes roadways, on-street parking, station locations

Megan Costa: In Syracuse area, most dense areas for transit in the city. Suburbs must think about land use/zoning now so development does not cause problems in the future

Universities and medical institutions key to changing mindset about cars and parking: They don't want to be in the parking business.

University Hill Corp supports this view.

Q: Current bus system is hard to use. A 15-minute trip takes an hour. Will BRT make that better?

A. (Houston a good example.) Can't have BRT conversation without talking about universal access. Need feeder system that works.

Q: Disincentives in Albany? Rising fees? A: U of Albany pushed parking farther from buildings so it's a longer walk.

In Albany, \$1.50/ride on 95% of system; no free transfers

Every time a transit authority modifies a route, people get upset. You improve service for some and you're making it more difficult for others.

Q: Do Albany PILOTs include mortgage recording tax? They're often given to companies that need bus service for workers or customers. Farrell: Same thing happens in Albany. You have to call the developer's bluff.

Q: How do we make long-term cultural shift from auto-centric society? A: Behavior is not going to change just because we think it's for the common good. We have to be intentional. Think of the long campaigns about seat belts and blue bins for recycling. Solutions are a mixture of programs and messaging.

Q: Does BRT lead to gentrification? In Albany, rate of redevelopment change is not so fast it is pushing anyone out. Most changes happen where no one lives. Do you want to prevent urban revitalization for fear of gentrification? Probably not.

Better access to OCC and Destiny mall will help economy.

Mortgage recording tax: State law that MRT dedicated to transportation. Starting discussion with state legislators about changing formula. (Sen. John DeFrancisco introduced legislation.)

Q: Incentives for institutional players? Price per ride is lower; try to convince institution not to spend on new parking garage by stressing cost savings.

[Capital Carshare](#): Not-for-profit received \$315,000 from the Capital District Transportation Committee and Capital District Transportation Authority to start it in 2014

[Vanpooling in Albany via Capital Moves](#).

Advice from Farrell: Focus first on gaining support from state legislators. Need a group from Upstate to advocate for infrastructure beyond roads and bridges.

--Submitted by Renée K. Gadoua, study
writer