

OCL Study Session, July 7, 2015: How CNY Moves

Meeting held at **SUNY Oswego Metro Center at 100 South Salina Street** (the Atrium office building on Clinton Square) in **Room 129**

Co-chairs: Heidi Holtz and Mary Kate Intaglietta

Attendees: Cheryl Allen, Elizabeth Allen, Ron Boxx, Tom Carlin, M.G. Clark, Mario Colone, Briana Cook, Megan Costa, Adria Finch, Elizabeth Hradil, Deborah Hundley, Daniel Kelley, Donna Knapp, Steve Koegel, Annette Krisake, Megan Lee, Rick Lee, Stan Linhorst, Sarah McIlvain, Melissa Menon, David Michel, Isaac Olson, Whitney Reed, Eric Rogers, Peter Sarver, Susan Schilling, Joanne Spoto Decker, Jai Subedi, Loretta Zolkowski

OCL: Sandra Barrett, Renee Gadoua

How CNY Moves By Bus: Centro and Centro riders. CENTRO presentation (Rick Lee and Steve Koegel); 5:05-5:40 – panel discussion (Rick Lee: deputy executive director and incoming executive director; Steve Koegel: marketing and communications director; and rider representatives Sally Johnston, Cheryl Allen, Mitchell Clark)

- A. Attendees tested Oswego Metro Center’s online instant voting system. System updates percentages as participants cast votes.

Question 1: In the past five years, I have used regular Centro buses:

- Never: 32%
- Rarely: 55%
- Fairly regularly: 5%
- Regularly: 9%

Question 2: I used CENTRO in the past five years for the following reasons:

- Because I don’t have a car and/or license: 2%
- To be environmentally conscious: 2%
- To take along with my bike: 1%
- To use the Connective Corridor bus: 5%
- To go to school or work: 7%
- To shop: 1%
- To go to an entertainment or sporting event: 1%
- To visit the fair: 13%

- B. Tom Carlin gave mini-presentation on BRT

BRT/Bus Rapid Transit is not a fancy bus line. It is more like a subway that runs on streets using buses. 5 elements of BRT:

1. Platform-level boarding
2. Off-board fare process
3. Dedicated bus lanes
4. Busway alignment
5. Intersection restriction

It's not simple. Most cities have not been able to complete BRT, which has given BRT a bad name.

C. Centro wrap-up by Rick Lee and Steve Koegel

Lee: 70% of riders depend on Centro for vital services

Mission is to provide safe service in an environmentally-friendly way

Effort to balance financial responsibility with what community needs. Three current studies will help inform future decisions:

- SMART 1 study by SMTC (Syracuse Metro Area Regional Transportation Study Phase 1, two-year study started June 2015)
- Route 81 Challenge: "Our organization is going to provide transportation no matter what configuration is chosen."
- OCL study How CNY Moves

Centro's financial reality, based on 2015-2016 budget

- New York state operating assistance: 48%
- Mortgage recording tax: 8%
- Local county matching funds: 5%
- Federal capital funds converted to operating funds: 13%
- Fare and contract fees: 24%

Last year, budget was \$4.4 million short.

Local matching funds remain flat.

State Sen. John DeFrancisco helped get funding to close this year's budget shortfall [and has introduced legislation for prescribed funding that would increase with inflation.](#)

Federal highway bill has had 30-plus extensions in recent years; expires again July 31, 2015: "It holds all of us hostage because we can't get the money we need." (U.S. Rep. John Katko sympathetic to this concern.)

Centro has the same budget structure as four upstate cities. Rochester and Albany collect much more from mortgage recording tax (Albany: \$11 million; Syracuse: \$5 million; Rochester: \$9 million forecast.)

Centro contracts with Syracuse University, OCC, Syracuse Board of Education. Other Upstate cities have similar arrangements.

Contracts are designed at cost and are revenue neutral.

- Lee said Centro is assessing all contracts.
- Federal laws limit competition with private carriers.
- 20 years ago, Centro could do more charter work and make a profit.

Koegel: Communities where public transit works best have urban density; limited, costly parking; traffic congestion; tourism

But Syracuse has: suburban sprawl (“the scourge of public transit”); affordable parking; the 20-minute commute

How do we get more people on board?

1. Make it easier to use

- New fare boxes: They accept larger bills and give change in credit for future rides; digital display; talk to passengers; smart cards in the future. (Mobil ticketing still problematic.)
- Presence on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube
- Upgraded trip planner
- Google Transit
- Redesigned website and schedules
- New system map
- Translation services
- Travel training program (works with people with disabilities, refugees, new riders) (**Mel Menon of On Track for Jobs** praised training program’s work with refugees.)
- Bus tracker: GPS tracking system (must geocode each route every 50 feet); real-time maps; predictive bus arrival info” “It’s sweet when it works well,” Koegel said. “One of the big fears bus riders have is that isolated feeling of sitting at the bus stop when: ‘Did I miss it?’”

2. Make it compete with cars

- Shorter travel time on routes
- Transit-oriented design
- Signal jumpers
- Reduce route deviations and bus stops: increase frequency; straight-line theory; Big Box challenge (Where do big stores put parking and doors?)
- Express routes and Park-N-Rides: Limited express roadways; limited resources top update both local and express buses; challenges of limited-stop local service; I-81

corridor perfect location for Park-N-Rides (Would have to purchase and maintain land.)

3. Make it a priority (Target employers and developers)

- Not everyone is getting a bus 5 minutes before they start work. Encourage flexible work shifts; subsidize transit via Fare Deal Program (Federal program subsidizes \$130/year.)
- Use Centro's technology
- Call before building/opening business: Don't assume we're coming to your company.

The future: BRT, light-rail, reshaped Centro depend on money.

D. Rider panel: Cheryl Allen: client with Visions for Change and depends on Centro 90-95% time for travel; Sally Johnston, Access CNY and Centro advisory group; Mitch Clark: not-for-profit consultant

Question from Allen regarding Centro change in pass system. (Change from 30- and 7-day unlimited rides to 20- and 30-ride passes): "I'm paying more money. They're making it hard for the person trying to do the right thing.

Lee: People were sharing passes with friends. "We had to tighten the system so it was fair. There was some abuse going on." (30-day passes used 350-plus times; 7-day passes used 150-plus times)

Johnston: Call-A-Bus is a transit system for people not able to use the regular system. If you're able to use the regular system, you're not eligible. Some people, including some with intellectual disabilities, need training to use regular system.

Service is needed: Many seniors live on modest incomes; Medicare does not pay for medical transport.

Very concerned about high-rise housing being built outside the city. "If they're not near a route, they're stuck with no way of getting around." Builders need to communicate with Centro.

Centro needs a structure for funding: "This is so vital to a vital community."

Clark: Has a car and bike, but uses bus in the winter. Has senior bus pass. Uses Centro to get to the fair.

Question: Are SU buses free? A: All are open to the public, including shuttles on campus

Question: Who rides the bus? A: In Onondaga County:

- 54% female
- 43% under 34
- 32% under 54
- 41% earn less than \$15,000/year
- 80% have no car
- 79% use bus to get to work

Question about bus shelter access: **A:** Sidewalks are a challenge in the winter. Centro clears all shelters (150 in city of Syracuse), but not all sidewalks at shelters. Centro will get 15 new shelters this summer. Federal regulations say they must be used equitably.

Ron Boxx of Visions for Change: Nonprofit budget constraints make it difficult to deliver services when fares increased or bus pass system changed. **Lee:** We can analyze expected changes and alert nonprofits in advance.

Question: How does the contract with city school district work? **A:** Board of Ed pays Centro to run the buses and students ride for free.

Question: Could non-profits form a co-op and create a similar contract? **Lee:** “Federal rules and question of fairness make it difficult, but we can talk about it.”

Explanation of Fair Deal: Commuter tax benefit: Employer can subsidize up to \$130 a year and write it off on taxes. Many employers don’t want to bother. Lee said Centro could market this more aggressively.

OCC student suggests more information and schedule/real-time arrival boards on campus.

Upcoming Meetings

Wednesday, July 15, 12-1:30 p.m. at SUNY Oswego Metro Center at 100 South Salina Street (Atrium office building on Clinton Square) Room 129: How CNY Moves to Jobs: decisions based on choice or necessity? – panel

Our meeting schedule will follow this pattern:

- First Tuesday of the month, 4:30-6 p.m., Locations TBA
- Third Wednesday of the month, 12-1:30 p.m., SUNY Oswego Metro Center.

Please let us know if you would like to be part of a panel design subcommittee on any of the upcoming topics proposed at the meeting: How CNY Moves around the county (town planning, development, land use); How CNY Moves those in need (health, human services, equitable practices); How CNY moves visitors and cultural tourists; How CNY moves on two wheels; How CNY moves on Complete Streets; How CNY Moves sharing cars, rides, shuttles.

Mini-Presentations: We invite folks to share articles, blog posts, videos etc. in 2-minute presentations at the beginning of each session. If you come across something that you think will be interesting, thought-provoking and/or worthy of further discussion, please let us know.

Submitted by Renée K. Gadoua, study writer