Nashville Sets the Stage for Transit Momentum with BRT Route

Although the Nashville, Tenn., region is one of the nation’s fastest-growing metropolitan areas, it has largely avoided introducing a high-capacity transit network appropriate for its size and growth trends. That's why the planned East-West bus rapid transit (BRT) corridor is so vital to the region's future. The 7.1-mile route – which will be dubbed The Amp, in recognition of the city's music legacy – is projected to carry more than 1.3 million riders each year and serve as the cornerstone of a growing transit network.

Although the region has explored rail transit options in the past – and currently offers Music City Star commuter rail service between downtown Nashville and Lebanon – hesitation over the cost and disruption of rail lines have led local leaders and transit planners to seek a more scalable introduction to high-capacity transit. As part of the strategy to introduce The Amp's East-West line, the city's Metropolitan Transportation Authority recently received a $1.2 million grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to help communicate the details, benefits and construction impacts of the $175 million project.

“As America's cities continue to grow, leaders understand that public transportation is critical to encouraging economic development and to making their communities more livable and attractive,” says Nick Turner, the Rockefeller Foundation's Managing Director. “It is what their citizens want, and high-quality BRT delivers.”

Indeed, local leaders – such as Nashville Metro Councilman Peter Westerholm – are cognizant of the need for the BRT network's first line to establish momentum for an enhanced and interconnected transit network crucial to the region's long-term prosperity.

“We need this project to succeed from day one, because Nashville doesn’t just need one BRT line, we need an entire network of more efficient transit services,” says Westerholm. “And the only way we go from having one transit line to a network is if the first one is highly successful.”

Connectivity Encapsulated:
Linking People and Destinations Beyond Wheels & Rails

When many people think of transit connectivity, they're immediately drawn to systems involving wheels: buses, trains, vans, bikes, and more. But numerous communities employ less traditional – but no less effective – means of moving people to build connections between neighborhoods, destinations and services.

Here, we take a look at some of these unconventional modes and strategies, from bus rapid transit in Nashville and transit-oriented development in Orlando, to novel travel modes such as inclined planes, ferry systems and aerial trams.
Establishing an Identity for Downtown Orlando

One of the chief criticisms of the central Florida region from those visiting from other metropolitan areas is the seeming lack of a bustling downtown district in Orlando. Of course, local residents will point to the estimated 65,000 daily daytime workers, residents and visitors in downtown Orlando in a city that was first settled in 1875. Nonetheless, new synergy and activity is expected to invigorate the district with the arrival of the SunRail regional rail service in 2014.

At the center of the 61-mile route connecting DeLand with Poinciana will be a trio of SunRail stations in downtown Orlando, linking existing commercial, retail and residential activity with new development centers, including the 5.6-acre transit-oriented development project at the LYNX Central Station on Garland Avenue. The project – recently approved by the city’s Municipal Planning Board – will include 275 residential apartments, a 126-room hotel, office space and ground-level retail and restaurants. It will be one of the largest mixed-use development projects in the region.

In addition to forthcoming SunRail trains, the LYNX Central Station facility already is the central transfer location for the region’s LYNX bus system, which carries more than 84,000 daily riders. The confluence of transit riders arriving by both bus and rail along with all-day activity generated by mixed-use development is intended to chart a new course for an increasingly vibrant downtown Orlando, where a host of activity centers, economic engines and community services are co-located at or near transit nodes.

“With LYNX Central Station, we have the emergence of the sustainable, walkable, transit-oriented development we’ve been talking about,” said Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer.

“We’re very excited,” says Marc Reicher, Senior Vice President of Rida Development Corp., which owns the development parcel. “We have the best multimodal site in Central Florida. This is going to further establish transit-oriented development and further establish the central business district.”
Affordability

Inclines Demonstrate Importance of Short Trips

Pittsburgh’s twin inclined planes – Duquesne and Monongahela – are among the city’s most iconic fixtures. The late Fred Rodg- ers – himself a Pittsburgher – patterned his famous neighborhood model trolley after the after the Duquesne Incline’s signature red-and-yellow motif. These hallmarks of the Three Rivers city’s identity were constructed more than a century ago not to lure tourists, but to provide fast, safe and efficient mobility across challenging but highly-traffic terrain.

Today, the dual inclines are not merely historical relics, but thriving components of Pittsburgh’s transportation network. The Monongahela – known locally as “The Mon,” opened in 1870 – experienced a more than 10 percent jump in ridership from 2011 to 2012. Last year, the funicular – owned by the Port Authority of Allegheny County – carried more than 1.25 million riders, representing growth of an additional 121,500 passengers. The Mon is easily accessible by the Port Authority’s light-rail network via its Station Square stop at the incline’s lower level station, with transfers available from light-rail trains and buses.

There are people who use the Mon Incline to commute back and forth to work daily, but its largely a destination for visitors,” says Port Authority Spokesman Jim Ritchie. “For people coming to Pittsburgh who are looking for things to do, travelling on the Mon Incline and the Duquesne Incline are on just about every list you see.”

The Mon’s counterpart – likewise bearing a clever local nickname, The Duq – is located about a mile upriver on Grandview Avenue and also reported increasing ridership, adding 2.5 percent more passengers in 2012 than the year before. Operated by the privately-run Society for the Preservation of the Duquesne Heights Incline, The Duq opened in 1877 and can also be reached by the Port Authority’s Route 40 bus route and accepts the system’s passes and tickets as fare. Elsewhere, inclines in Johnstown, Pa., Chattanooga, Tenn., and Los Angeles, Calif. all noted growing ridership on their funiculars.

(For more information on inclined planes in Pittsburgh and Johnstown, see RAIL #8 and in Chattanooga, see Community Transportation, Winter 2008)

First Mile, Last Mile; High Mile, Low Mile

When discussing connectivity, the concept of mobility links designed to serve the first and list mile of a trip is often a key facet of discussion. In addition to biking, walking, shared-use vehicles and bicycles as well as streetcars and circulator buses, another mode is increasingly under consideration to serve these short travel segments: aerial trams and gondolas.

Long-employed in mountainous regions in Europe and ski facilities everywhere, a moving cabin suspended from a hanging wire is often a solution to rocky landscapes and gorges and valleys that separate communities not all far removed from each other. Portland opened its Aerial Tram in 2006 to connect the Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) campus atop Marquam Hill with the city’s South Waterfront district below to connect with the Portland Streetcar system. Travelling a distance of 500 up and 3,300 feet in length, the Tram carries more than 3,700 riders.
Affordability

per day and honors passes from local transit systems. Frequent commuters on the three-minute trip can purchase an annual unlimited pass for only $100, while OHSU students, faculty and staff ride free.

Elsewhere, the Roosevelt Island Tramway in New York City has operated since 1976 and compliments local subway service. Austin, Texas is considering several gondola lines to respond to the region’s rapid growth, while community leaders in Washington, D.C. and northern Virginia have proposed a aerial tram to span the Potomac River between Georgetown and Rosslyn, where no direct Metro rail connection is on the immediate horizon and the existing Key Bridge is at perpetual gridlock during peak periods.

“If you’re talking about an area that’s small enough and dense enough, and just from a pure economic standpoint, when you’re looking at medium-sized cities that don’t have the tax base to support such large civic projects like subway systems, it just makes a lot of economic sense,” says Michael McDaniel, a proponent of the Austin gondola plan. “That’s something where we don’t compete for the same congested real estate that you do with lots of other mass transit systems.”

(For more information on the Portland Aerial Tram, see Community Transportation, Winter 2007)

Transit Over the Water

When most people think of community and public transit systems, they usually envision a vehicle with wheels of some kind. Even the non-traditional inclined plains and aerial trams use wheels to drive their cables. But for several communities across the nation, transit riders utilize ferries to traverse the bodies of water that separate their places of residence and work.

The nation’s most extensive ferry transit networks is found in the state of Washington. Eleven unique ferry routes operate across the Puget Sound, connecting many of the state’s largest communities, including Seattle, Bremerton and Edmonds, as well as international service between Anacortes, the San Juan islands and Victoria Island, British Columbia. Additionally, Kitsap Transit provides its own local ferry service, with two routes connecting Bremerton with Annapolis and Port Orchard across the Sinclair Inlet. The system is working to refurbish its ferries and terminals over the coming years.

“We’re trying to make good decisions to create longevity with the terminals, and the federal funds will augment local funds,” says Wendy Clark-Getzin, Planning and Capital Programs Director for Kitsap Transit.

Other communities also make use of water transit to enhance their portfolio of options. The New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s Staten Island Ferry carries more than 75,000 daily passengers on eight vessels travelling between Manhattan and its namesake borough. Substantial ferry networks also exist throughout New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, North Carolina, the Midwest, Louisiana, across the Great Lakes and California’s Bay Area and Southern California regions, as well as stand-alone ferry lines elsewhere.