"Where Seldom is Heard, a Discouraging Word"

In the boundless grasslands of western South Dakota, community transit thrives thanks to top-notch transit managers and advocates.

by Scott Bogren

A rusted red Chevy van sits atop a mound of dirt -- a red and brown island in a vast sea of green, grassy prairie. Jutting lengthwise from the van's roof, somehow, a weathered sheet of plywood announces with faded lettering: "Welcome to Scenic, S.D."

Nestled into the bend of a lonesome two-lane rural highway just north of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, there's not much to the town of Scenic. I counted three or four run-down homes that looked occupied, a similar number that I hope were abandoned and a beat-up tavern with a couple of glaring neon signs strewn upon its front facade. In all honesty, Scenic was not; but it aptly captures the struggle, the beauty and the enigmas of western South Dakota.

I came to South Dakota to chronicle the challenge for community transportation in serving such a widespread rural territory. The flowing grass lands covering much of the state west of the Missouri River were once known as the Great American Desert. Desolate and inspiring, the rolling hills are interrupted only by the sudden emergence of a series of jagged mountains -- the Black Hills.

This challenge is made even greater by a decided lack of state and federal funding for public transit throughout the state. One of the unspoken truths about the victory that the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) represents is that the progress it mandates is incremental. In a state like South Dakota -- which had little transit funding to begin with -- a 15 percent increase in funding translates into about $300,000 in real growth for the entire state. It's not enough meet the current demand for service, or for the many transit agencies to even purchase replacement vehicles.

I figured to run into much unmet need for mobility and the paralyzing isolation that the lack of a personal automobile can engender in rural America. And indeed, I found that which I sought. But I also found a creative, opportunistic group of committed, compassionate community transportation managers and advocates all doing the best they could to provide efficient mobility in difficult surroundings. These are their stories.

Amazing Grace
Crossing over into either Todd or Shannon County, S.D., one expects to be confronted by grinding poverty. Home to the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Lakota Indian Reservations respectively, the two counties are often cited as the very poorest in the United States. On his recently conducted Poverty Tour, President Clinton stopped in Pine Ridge.

Consider these ponderous statistics about the reservations: 80 percent unemployment, an infant death rate three times that of the rest of the nation and more than half the population without an automobile.

Indeed, the poverty and isolation of these reservations is stunning. But so, too, is the scenery. At once undulating waves of prairie grass split by dry gulches and islands of golden trees and red sumac; and then a lunar-like landscape of sandstone canyons and pine forests, there is a truly unique quality to the region.

Nothing comes easy on the Rosebud reservation (total reservation population: 15,000), why should transportation be any different? The vehicles operated by Rosebud Sioux Transit -- mostly vans and a couple of buses -- are falling apart-old with mileages reaching into the 400,000s. Dispatching and scheduling is left to a clipboard and wall calendar. The CB radio that once allowed communication with drivers died several years ago. The agency simply does without. There is a lot of doing without in Rosebud.

From behind his metal desk inside a dilapidated, paint-chipped building with a sky blue metal roof and bars on its windows, Leroy Sleeping Bear runs Rosebud Sioux Transit (RST). He does so facing obstacles and conditions unknown to most community transit operators. Under the conditions, the service he puts on the street is nothing short of remarkable.

A patient man with sharp, dark eyes hidden behind sunglasses, Sleeping Bear refuses to complain or appear bitter about the situation with which he is faced, no matter how daunting. Having been with the agency since its inception in 1983, he understands the challenge. He is quick, however, to point out how much more RST could do with more vehicles. More than anything else, Sleeping Bear seeks new vehicles for his service.

"That's what we need more than anything else is new vehicles. Even with our service, there are still many residents on the reservation who are doing without," he says insistently. "We need new buses and vans."

The agency hasn't received a new vehicle since 1992. More recently, a used station wagon that the state provided in 1998 (which auspiciously had a mere 28,000 miles) shakes so badly that Sleeping Bear fears the dashboard will soon rocket off
the car. Of the 10 vehicles that the agency operates, several are strewn about the
front lot of the agency in various stages of disrepair.

The agency receives some federal funding through the state (Section 5310 and
5311), the tribal government scratches together some match money and the
agency currently contracts with Medicaid to provide non-emergency service and
with the local casino for employment trips. It's not enough.

"Would you want your children driven around in any of those?" Sleeping Bear asks,
pointing toward a run-down van that's clearly beyond its useful life.

Last year, according to Sleeping Bear's assistant Lorrain Long Crow (who has been
with the agency since 1989), the agency -- astoundingly -- provided nearly 80,000
trips. Most of these went to the general public, with elderly natives accounting for
about 20 percent of the agency's ridership. Employment runs, medical trips,
shopping and education are all part of RST's mission. There is, however, a telling
pattern to the agency's service.

"On the first of the month, when they get their assistance checks, we take a lot of
people into Mission (another town on the reservation) to pay monthly bills," says
Sleeping Bear. "Then, on the tenth of each month, food stamps arrive and we take
many residents to the grocer. By the last week of the month, trips fall off because
many people are out of money."

Mission is also home to the Rosebud Sioux's casino, which is the single largest
employer in the region after the tribal government. RST ferries employees to and
from work at the casino, which is certainly not on the scale of the Foxwoods-style
mega-casino. As per the contract, the casino pays half the $5 fare for its employee.
Yet even this service, which seems a natural for the agency, is problematic.

"We were being used as alarm clocks by some of the workers in the morning. They
wouldn't get up for work until the bus arrived. We waited and waited, and then
ended up being late to Mission. The casino managers didn't like this," recalls
Sleeping Bear. "So now we give them three minutes. We just can't make everyone
else late for work. People need to be responsible."

The outlying towns of the Rosebud reservation are sparse -- Mission, for example,
has a population just over 700. Towns like Antelope, St. Francis and Parmelee seem
to rise out of the prairie and then recede just as quickly. They are often a group of
aging trailers reachable only by unpaved roads. Providing an effective transit
service in this environment is a real challenge. Again, Sleeping Bear admits he just
doesn't have the vehicles to serve all of the communities.

"We could probably add another 25,000 trips per year," he estimates. "There are
communities we just can't serve."
And Rosebud Sioux Transit doesn't just serve the reservation. Weekly, the agency provides service into Rapid City for medical care and other needs; a two-hour one-way trip toward the Black Hills to the west. Monthly, the system goes all the way into Sioux Falls on the Minnesota/Iowa border, some 250 miles to the east.

There's a relaxed atmosphere at RST that might seem like apathy to one not knowing any better. Both Sleeping Bear and Long Crow try to remind passengers to call as far in advance as possible, but reality being what it is, the agency handles many last-minute requests. As for hours of operation, Sleeping Bear smiles broadly and confides that they'll pick up anyone at anytime as long as they can get a free vehicle and driver, even on weekends or at nights.

"Twenty-four hours would be nice," adds Sleeping Bear.

As I discussed the particulars of Rosebud Sioux Transit with Sleeping Bear, an old radio in the corner of the office he shares with Lorrain began to play Amazing Grace. The soulful song lent just the right backdrop to the service RST provides. In such an environment, Rosebud Sioux Transit is amazing.

Unlocking Opportunity

In Rapid City, located in the northeast corner of the Black Hills, the Native American Heritage Association (NAHA) works to increase mobility options for Natives residing in all of the reservations west of the Missouri River: Rosebud, Pine Ridge, Cheyenne River, Lower Brule and Standing Rock.

A sophisticated fund-raising operation attached to an innovative, service-oriented program development arm, NAHA aims to offer Natives increased access to Rapid City's two hospitals, the Indian Health Service's Sioux Sans Hospital and Rapid City Regional.

The association is capably run by Lorenzo Black Lance, a Brule Sioux who is one part accomplished artist and another part entrepreneurial visionary. A tall, proud man with jet black hair in braids that tumble across either side of his broad chest, Black Lance has a confident stride and wastes few words.

Rather than dealing with the political issues and in-fighting that occur on many of the reservations, Black Lance prefers to raise money independently and then develop on-the-ground programs with an instant effect. If reservation residents need heat, NAHA delivers cut wood, clothes and even generators. Black Lance first realized that transportation was an issue on the reservations in a tangential way.

Many Lakota from Pine Ridge (where there is no comparable public transportation agency to Rosebud Sioux Transit) were coming into Rapid City for chemotherapy without the means to get back home. Because they never knew whether a patient
could make it back to the hospital, doctors preferred to administer chemotherapy five, six or even seven straight days.

"The treatment was virtually killing these people," recalls Black Lance. "They couldn't make it home afterward, so we (NAHA) were paying for them to stay in a local motel. It was getting expensive."

In April, the agency devised a short-term solution. It purchased a local motel not far from the hospital and in June began housing chemotherapy patients for as long as they needed, and with space for their families as well. The motel has 18 separate rooms and Black Lance figures it will pay for itself in two years by saving the organization hotel/motel costs. But the issue of transportation remained.

Black Lance knows that many reservation residents forego necessary medical treatment because of a lack of mobility. He hopes that the vehicles NAHA is beginning to purchase (they recently took delivery of a brand-new eight-passenger van they're prepping for service) will help more Lakota come in for treatment and lessen the need for such creative solutions as purchasing a motel.

"Transportation is one of the most critical needs for our people," he explains. "It's right up there with food, clothing and heat. Transportation unlocks opportunity."

**Serving the Northern Hills**

Newell, S.D. (Pop. 800), is the type of small rural town that -- frankly -- may or may not make it. A sign welcomes you to the "Sheep Capital of the Nation," a boast backed up by a series of large wooden-fenced stockyards on the outskirts of town that are full of sheep.

I had asked Barbara Cline, director of transportation for Prairie Hills Transit to show me the most challenging part of her service. An hour later, we were in Newell.

Like so many other tenuous small towns, Newell is a study in contradiction. Main street seems to be falling apart with crumbling sidewalks and numerous buildings badly in need of a new coat of paint and general upkeep. A couple blocks away, however, sturdy homes line a glorious, tree-shaded street. City Hall stands newly painted and well-kept, separated by an alley from a doleful, unoccupied brick building.

Prairie Hills Transit is part of Newell's lifeline, keeping it connected to the rest of the region and providing its citizens who can't or don't drive the opportunity to access services not found in town. The agency serves Newell twice weekly, mostly bringing seniors into Sturgis for nutrition services, shopping and medical appointments. It may not seem like much to the outside world, but Cline knows just how important her agency's buses are, and what they represent.
"It's our job to serve places like Newell," says Cline without hesitation. "Truly, without us, many seniors would have no other way to go. There's not much for them in Newell. But it is home."

Prairie Hills Transit operates out of a senior congregate housing unit in Spearfish, a town of more than 7,000 people hugging the northern edge of the Black Hills. It's a busy housing unit -- known as Hickory House -- with seniors sitting out front on benches waiting for the bus. Cline's comfortably decorated office is next door to the center's beauty shop.

Cline has been with the agency since its beginning in 1991 and is a life-long resident of Spearfish. Her commitment to the area is palpable. During her tenure at Prairie Hills, she's seen the service grow from one serving seniors alone to a general public transit service.

"We started out with this old green van and the first couple of weeks were pretty slow," Cline recalls. "But within a year we were booked solid, seniors just loved the service."

From these meager beginnings, familiar to many community transportation operators and advocates, grew a full-service rural transit agency. Today, the agency is funded through TEA-21's Section 5311 program and funds from Older Americans Act Title III(b). It serves what is known locally as the Northern Hills including Deadwood, Lead, Sturgis and Belle Fourche. Medical appointments are still the top destination, though jobs and after-school programs are becoming increasingly popular.

In addition to the federal funds, Prairie Hills receives some local money as well. It's not a lot, as Cline admits, but the $8,000 Spearfish contributes helps immensely and illustrates a local commitment to providing mobility options for residents.

"We've built a solid reputation locally and that shows in the funding the town provides," says Cline.

Another destination that Prairie Hills serves is Rapid City (40 miles to the southeast), though the service is almost exclusively medical appointments. Cline is sensitive to the need to keep shopping trips and such in the Northern Hills.

"Loading up a van to shop somewhere else doesn't make the community happy," she explains.

For a couple of weeks every year, the Northern Hills constitute the most populated area in all of South Dakota. Each August, Sturgis welcomes a half million motorcycle enthusiasts -- mostly Harley Davidson riders -- to a rally of enormous proportions. Traffic throughout the region, even along I-90, grinds to a standstill.
"Many Spearfish residents help work the rally, but find it virtually impossible to get over to Sturgis and park. This year, we're going to offer special bus service and I bet it will be a great success," predicts Cline. It's an indication of just how far Prairie Hills Transit has come from its early days as a seniors-only transit service with a green van.

Still, no matter how grandiose the plans for expansion of service and new customers, serving a town like Newell is Prairie Hills Transit's reality check.

**Up to the Challenge**

The need for public transportation in an area like western South Dakota is very real. Often, I've heard the argument that places like those I visited don't need transportation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Thousands of people would find themselves totally isolated without that bus coming by, whenever it does. It's not until you actually see the distances involved, and the spartan towns and destinations in between, that the scale of the region and the challenges it presents become evident. But the need for mobility is no different than that in New York City, Los Angeles or any other urban area.

The land itself is a paradox: the very thing that makes it beautiful -- the vast rolls of prairie -- challenges transit providers and supporters to develop innovative service. In the case of the individuals like Leroy Sleeping Bear, Barbara Cline and Lorenzo Black Lance, the solutions are up to the challenge.