

Bus Riders Stand Together to Improve Service

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They became exasperated with budget cuts that stripped weekend and evening service and erased entire routes. They grew tired of seeing public transportation money spent on pricey rail projects while their bus system withered. So they joined together and pledged to do something with — not to — the transit agency.

Today they are the AC Transit Bus Riders Union — nearly 1,100 members strong and committed to ensuring effective bus transportation for the Oakland, Calif., region.

"Our purpose is to give bus riders a voice in the decisions that affect them," says Charlie Betcher, an organizer of the union. "If we reach 1,000 members, when we speak, somebody will listen."

They have, and somebody is already listening.

"It is very empowering for a bus agency to have its customers speak loudly about what the system means to them," says AC Transit General Manager Sharon Banks. "They are also our toughest critics."

The forces that moved these riders to organize prevail in many cities, small towns and even rural areas. The need for reliable transportation knows no geographic boundaries — nor do concerned citizens. Who better to raise the standards of community transportation than the customers?

Once Voiceless, Riders Organize

The concept of bus riders organizing to advocate for their system is not necessarily new. In 1979, for example, subway and bus riders in New York City joined forces to create the world's best known transit rider organization — the Straphangers.

"We remind the transit agency that their goal is to provide good transit service, rather than merely pleasing the governor," says Joseph Rappaport, a coordinator for the Straphangers.

Recently, however, the message many transit riders are sending is more urgent. An increasing number of public transportation riders have made the move to organize

themselves and become advocates for their source of mobility, rather than passively watching their buses — and their freedom — disappear.

"Transit riders are finally realizing that they can use political power just like anybody else, and that they'd better," says Rappaport. "The politicians are in their cars, and they just don't understand it makes sense to fund public transit adequately."

Betcher agrees, but with a more dire outlook: "We realized that if we don't stand up for our system (AC Transit), no one will."

Working Together

The AC Transit Bus Riders Union can trace its origins to events some 400 miles south of the Bay Area in Los Angeles (see Sept./Oct. 1996 CTR , p. 17). The Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles, Calif., in 1996, successfully fought for increased inner city bus service. There is, however, a critical distinction. Whereas the Los Angeles riders and the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority were — and continue to be — adversaries, their Oakland brethren work peaceably with AC Transit. It's a distinction born of long-standing communication and mutual respect.

"The AC Bus Riders Union evolved from many other groups that we work with," says Banks. "They are our most articulate proponents."

Indeed, the AC Bus Riders Union is one of many customer groups in the Bay Area that both watch over and support public transportation. Other groups include the Transbay Task Force, the Accessibility Advisory Committee, United Seniors, Rescue AC Transit, the Alliance for AC Transit and more.

Banks cautions that transit officials need to seek input and direction from rider groups before there is a crisis. "You need to embrace constituent groups and not ignore them," she says. "It becomes a lot more difficult to build a friendly relationship if you don't acknowledge a group until you're trying to cut service."

"We are bus supporters and support AC Transit," says Betcher. "We built the union without the support of AC Transit and are organizationally independent of it, but certainly welcome any support it might give us."

Service Cuts Highlight Need for Cooperation

Banks should know about cutting service. In the past two years, AC Transit, due to funding shortfalls, has cut more than 1,000 hours of service — much of it on weekends and evenings. Obviously, the Bus Riders Union protested, but communication between the groups continued.

"We often disagree," says Banks about her ongoing relationship with the Union. "But I would never want them co-opted because we value their input and their criticism."

Even after reducing service 11 percent, AC Transit carries more than 225,000 passengers each weekday. Current estimates, however, show that the agency could face annual deficits of \$5 million more, so continued decreases are surely a possibility. It's becoming a drastic situation that threatens neighborhoods and residents that can least afford to be without bus service.

In areas like North Richmond where more than half the population are on some form of public assistance, reductions in bus service cut off residents from work, education, health care and more.

"People here don't look at it like a commute," says North Richmond resident Joe Wallace, acknowledging that AC Transit's bus service plays a more central role in the lives of its passengers than just going to-and-from work.

"The service cuts were heart-breaking," recalls Banks. "Yet without the foundation of working together that we had with these rider groups, they could have been worse."

"A year ago, most people were hostile to AC Transit, blaming them for cutting services," says Betcher. "I believe the union has turned that around and shown the public the complex forces that forced AC to cut. We've educated the public."

Advocating for AC Transit

For a number of reasons, the most important of which is a long-standing working relationship, AC Transit's riders refuse to blame only the agency when their service is cut. Rather, they look toward local politicians and decision makers and try to rectify the problem.

For example, earlier this summer the city of San Francisco targeted a transfer terminal located in an aging rail station for destruction. The Transbay Terminal allows AC Transit riders to more easily make connections to San Francisco. Yet city officials wanted the terminal razed to make room for development. The AC Transit Bus Riders Union joined forces with AC Transit management to oppose the city's plans and the bus system even filed a lawsuit to stop the demolition.

However, after local politicians made it clear that state funding for AC Transit would be jeopardized by the suit, the action was dropped. Still, the united front of opposition has kept the Transbay Terminal open to-date.

AC Transit Bus Rider Union members also are involved in the more long-term battle to secure dedicated funding for their bus system. The union has been particularly adept at highlighted inequities that exist in local funding patterns.

Last May, for example, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), San Francisco, Calif.'s rail system, celebrated the opening of a new \$517 million line with 14 miles of new track and two art deco stations. BART officials estimated that taking into consideration capital costs, the agency is spending \$16 for every rider on its new line — a heavy subsidy. In comparison, AC Transit officials estimate they spend \$2.65 in capital and operating costs for every bus rider.

"We don't necessarily want to pit one type of transit against the other, but we need to point out some of the inequities that exist," says Betcher. "The people who ride AC Transit often have no other option so for them the system is very important."

An Exception, Or the Rule?

Of course, not every rider group has the positive relationship and history of goodwill that exists in Oakland. In Broward County, Fla., the Association of Transit Consumers, Inc. (ATC) takes a more pragmatic approach.

"Our objective is to have the ridership make decisions," says ATC President Rancy Snyder. "After all, the mass transit officials are not riding the system and putting up with what passengers have to put up with."

And Snyder has first-hand experience with passengers from both the perspective of a rider and of a driver. He used to drive vans for Broward County Social Services transportation and now operates mass transit buses along Broward County Transit's fixed-routes. Snyder believes that his seat behind the wheel gives him insight that few others have.

"I noticed, soon after starting at both jobs," he recalls, "that the passengers had no input into the system that was supposed to serve them."

Passengers would have complaints, he says, but they were afraid of retribution from the provider so they'd mostly keep concerns and suggestions to themselves. These experiences led to the formation of ATC.

As opposed to the situation in Oakland, the ATC has a largely antagonistic relationship with Broward County Transit and the region's Tri-Rail system. According to Rappaport with the Straphangers in New York City, this is hardly unusual.

"We try to be both friendly and adversarial," says Rappaport. "We try to work with the MTA, but that comes after we've sued them, we've held protests, we've

attacked them in the press. We realize that we're working toward the same goal — which is not the case in all cities."

"Transit officials here grumble about having to go through public hearings," says Snyder. "They (the officials) feel that they know best and that the public is just a pain."

Building a Foundation

Public transit services can only be improved by increased communication with, and participation from, riders and the community at-large. One of the most common traits of dismal public transit service is, not surprisingly, a lack of effective community or rider participation. Recent issues of Community Transportation have profiled such cases in Macon, Ga. (see Sept/Oct. 1997) and in Los Angeles, Calif. (see Sept./Oct. 1996).

In Oakland, Calif., however, the AC Transit Bus Riders Union is working with the transit agency to ensure that public transportation is safeguarded.

"The freeways hold no answer to our mobility needs," says Betcher, "so we need our buses."

Rappaport concurs: "If you want transit options that are affordable and work for a variety of people, you've got to become involved."