

Sitka uses help from the Association to harness its existing transportation resources into a system serving everyone.

Jutting out into the Pacific, southeast Alaska's Baranof Island is accessible by air and water only. Public transportation here in the heart of the nation's largest national forest has included such non-traditional modes as the float plane and small watercraft. Connecting the residents of Sitka with medical care, jobs, education, shops and each other, however, requires something much more traditional, but no less effective — community and public transportation. Guided by help from the Community Transportation Association, this small, isolated community leveraged its existing assets with new ideas and new resources to introduce new mobility to Sitka.

The Sitka Solution

By Rich Sampson

The Sitka Scene

Geography has played a large role in Sitka's economy. Nestled on the far side of Baranof Island, Alaska's fifth largest city is flanked on the east by forested mountains and on the west by the Pacific Ocean, making Sitka a self-contained community. A narrow width of only half a mile is juxtaposed with a length of 14 miles. The downtown core contains the majority of offices, services and retail businesses, while residences and small businesses are stretched along the city's length. Frequent inclement weather accentuates what can already be a significant commute.

The cost of owning and maintaining a private vehicle in Sitka is high. Fuel, parts and accessories must be barged into the community, incurring shipping costs, while insufficient competition in a small town creates a high-priced market.

Many residents, and nearly all visitors, are without cars, and totally transit-dependent. Although some tourist transportation routes are operated in Sitka during the summer months, the lack of year-round service severely restricts mobility in the community.

Identifying transportation as a major barrier to education, training and jobs, the Sitka Tribe initiated a dialogue with the Community Transportation Association in, eventually leading to a technical assistance project.



Improved transportation in Sitka means a ride for everyone.



Community Rides was launched in 2002.

Leveraging Community Assets

Helping communities reach their potential is a primary focus of the Association's technical assistance programs. Regardless of size, every community has unique transit needs and often a pool of assets to tap. Identifying those vital resources is the first step toward building new mobility options.

With assistance from the Association, the Sitka Tribe organized an informal transportation committee in 1997, bringing together more than 20 organizations, businesses and residents. Their task was to investigate and prioritize local transportation needs. Based on the progress of that committee, the Association's Charles Rutkowski visited Sitka in January 1999 to meet with the committee, existing area transportation providers, organizations and constituencies needing services to initiate the transportation planning process. Propelled by these steady developments, the Center for Community — a local non-profit service agency and an active partner with the Tribe in the committee's efforts — applied for, and was awarded a Rural Passenger Transportation Technical Assistance Grant through the Community Transportation Association.

"Sitka was an ideal candidate for our help, in that it already had multiple existing transportation assets and

an overarching spirit to leverage them to their fullest," says Rutkowski of the award to Sitka. He adds that "they also really demonstrated strong prospects for the effort to materialize and become successful."

This investment allowed for the hiring of a transportation consultant to help design a public transportation system plan for Sitka. The Association and the project team eventually selected LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. In meetings with government and tribal officials, business leaders and individuals, the team helped to determine key local transportation issues, existing conditions, unmet needs, and values, visions and strategies for a desirable public transit system. All these components would form the basis for a service-alternatives analysis, offering five configurations for new fixed-route and demand-response operations.

"Sitka had the advantage of a wealth of providers and operations on the ground already," said Gordon Shaw, president of LSC Transportation Consultants. He also noted the strong initiative taken by those involved in the effort, saying "there was a high degree of community cohesion and a willingness to take the risk to produce results."

Indeed, an impressive level of transportation service was already established in the community,

though segmented and uncoordinated. Twelve agencies and organizations in the Sitka area operated 18 different transportation services. Among them were organizations specializing in transportation for human services, schools and education, senior services and tourism needs. The design process for the system alternatives quickly revealed this inherent advantage Sitka possessed and acted to maximize them for the expanded service plan. This meant that once routes and service elements were designed, they could easily be contracted to an existing transportation provider rather than establishing a new entity.

When the group and consultants investigated potential service providers, solutions arose naturally to resolve the contracting challenge. Southeast Senior Services had been operating door-to-door transportation service for over two decades before the public transportation system was planned. Based on this experience, they became the logical choice to operate



The system serves tourists as well as residents.

the paratransit aspect of the system. Likewise, the appropriate operator for the new fixed route service also became apparent, as the Sitka Tribe had been operating its Tribal Tours service since 1997 during the tourist season and to meet the large cruise ships that dock on the island. Given the infrastructure and culture developed to support the service, the decision to contract with the Sitka Tribe to operate the fixed route service was another natural choice.

Conchita Elsensohn, who oversees the system (eventually termed Community RIDES) for the Center for Community, sees the arrangement as a healthy foundation for public transportation in Sitka. She says, "Working with Tribal Tours and Southeast Senior Services as operators has produced a supportive climate where the transit system can flourish. These organizations are well-established in the community and afford a high degree of authenticity for the service."

How Sitka Got Its Transit

With the operators for the service lined-up, the next aspect in deploying the system was to procure vehicles and facilities, as well as funding for the associated operation costs.

So began the dollars and cents portion of the project, with diverse dollars making the most sense. Fortunately, for a community with limited funds on-hand for the effort, the technical assistance program also identified some diverse and useful monetary opportunities to launch the service.

"The funding strategies developed with the technical assistance plan focused on the means where we could obtain funding options that would be suitable to implement the service," says Elsensohn.

Equipped with this knowledge, Sitka found a willing host in the Center for Community, which could shepherd all these resources once they were acquired. This would allow the eventual providers, Tribal Tours and Southeast Senior Services to continue to focus on their primary activities and to gear-up to operate the service.

"The Center for Community was a great resource to have when building the system so the service could be well-organized and allow someone to focus on the funding," says Anna Winters of Southeast Senior Services.

On behalf of the community coalition, the State of Alaska Department of Transportation allocated federal formularized funds for rural, and elderly and persons with disabilities, to the Center for Community, along with contributions from the state. In addition, the agency was also awarded a Job Access and Reverse Commute grant by the Federal Transit Administration, as an important focus of the service was providing transportation to obtain and maintain employment. To accompany the Job Access grant, the Community Transportation Association selected the project as a grant recipient of its Joblinks Employment Transportation Initiative, to support programs synthesizing transit and employment linkages.

While all these funding elements were essential to implementing the plans, Sitka took ownership of its transit system one step further by ensuring the totality of the community was engaged in the forthcoming service. As an area without large commercial interests, the small business community is the social and economic heart of Sitka, and likewise for its transit system. Cognizant of this framework, the Chamber of Commerce was involved in reaching out to local business to request any contributions they were willing to make to the transit system. This campaign even included Greater Sitka Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Lawrence Blood and his staff going door-to-door at area establishments making the case and collecting funds offered by these businesses. The funds raised by the drive were used as part of the local match required for federal funds. The fact that this type of effort was

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made at all, rather than the ultimate impact it had on the finances of the service, was the important consideration, in that it caused an awareness and excitement for the new system when it opened. It also built a genuine sense of community ownership.

“The involvement of the local businesses in terms of contributions as a local match [for the federal funds] was successful because our corporate community realized the transit system was an essential service to have in Sitka, and that it would also deliver employees and customers to their locations,” says Blood, who has also chaired the transit advisory committee since its inception in 1997.

This melting-pot approach to funding sources is not only a bellwether for the long-term stability of the system, but also a notable model for building cohesive — and sustainable — funding structures.

“We take implementation very seriously,” explains Charles Rutkowski of the Community Transportation Association. He adds that “a great strategy isn’t worth much without creative financing to make it happen.”

Community RIDES Is Born

In September 2002, the Community RIDES buses began rolling through Sitka, establishing the city’s first solidified public transit system. Two fixed-route bus lines, operated by the Sitka Tribe of Alaska, link the downtown area at the south of the island with

residential areas, employment centers and Sitka Tribe facilities across the island. Demand-response service has been expanded through Southeast Senior Services.

The two fixed routes provide service Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. until 6:30 p.m., while paratransit trips operate 6:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. seven days a week. The system serves the Sitka population of 9,500 residents, 30 to 40 percent of which are members of the Sitka Tribe. Persons with low-incomes constitute a sizable contingent of ridership of the fixed-routes, while seniors and persons with disabilities take advantage of both aspects of the system.

Nearly two years later, Community RIDES is mobilizing a mix of employees, customers, visitors and Sitka residents. The chief objectives for the service laid-out by Sitka’s informal transportation committee during its design, namely accessing employment and community services, have become the hallmarks of ridership trends in the system’s formative years.

The Chamber of Commerce’s Lawrence Blood attributes the system’s following to a schedule that is convenient and reliable, while also reaching the key destinations and services in the community. Moreover, the relationships built between organizations in developing and supporting the system has translated into bonds which yield progress in other areas of community action.

“The coordination among the groups in the project was unbelievable,” says Blood. “We really found some common ground when addressing transportation that has continued in other areas.”

Sitka’s Ongoing Effort

The dedicated effort to deliver needed transportation options displayed by the seemingly small and physically isolated community of Sitka is one that transcends limitations and encompasses momentum to achieve results. The progression of goals into plans, and plans into service is one predicated on essential collaboration and responsiveness to specific conditions. Even after Sitka’s initial objectives were achieved, continual improvement and reassessment are indicative of an effort that is not designed for conclusion, but evolution.

The energy needed for melding these resources and ambitions of these various organizations and interests was found in the Rural Passenger Transportation Technical Assistance program, allowing Sitka to leverage the assets it had all along.

Said Conchita Elsensohn of the project, “With the presence of the Community Transportation Association, the community in Sitka was able to effect action on prior discussions and enrich the positive developments which were underway.” 🚌