



Complimenting their new home, new vehicles arrived in April through an innovative state capital replacement program.

For Director Sandy Mack, the new transit facility is a dream come true.

here to stay

people's transit finds its place in huron

By Beth Wilson

It was a cold, windy November afternoon, and Sandy Mack's shovel had to dig past a layer of snow before the ceremonial scoops of dirt could commence the much-anticipated ground-breaking event. The ceremony marked the beginning of a new phase in Huron, S.D.'s mobility — construction of a brand new Great Station to keep the community moving forward. What a difference three decades makes.

Thirty years earlier, mobility options expanded when the Huron Area Senior Center bought a cargo van through the federal surplus warehouse. As the owners of a bare-bones vehicle with no power steering and only a driver's seat, the Center's Board rounded up available passenger seats from a car dealer in nearby Aberdeen. Public transit had begun in Huron, but it would take another 25 years for it find a real home.

In the Beginning

Today's People's Transit is the evolutionary fruition of that first vehicle set in motion three decades ago. Recognizing the mobility needs of seniors in Huron, the Senior Center initiated a pilot program for the state of South Dakota in the mid-1970s. The service rapidly expanded to meet an ever-growing need, not only transporting seniors to the Center for meals and activities but also taking them to medical services. A 15-passenger van was added in 1975, followed the next year by the state's first accessible vehicle.



A large lot of overgrown weeds and dead trees was transformed into Huron's Great Station (above).

When Sandy Mack arrived in 1978, the Senior Center's transit program was at the helm of a community-wide coordination effort, and on the cusp of tremendous change and growth. People's Transit had initiated contracts for service with a local training center and other senior care centers in the area. The transportation service continued to be funded through the Older Americans Act until 1981, when federal rural transportation investment was added. With this new investment came an expanded mission. The system went public — adding public service, school children and daycare clients to its largely older American passenger roster.

Service continued to grow, and People's Transit advanced with additional staff, new vehicles and updated technology. Still, the vehicles remained stationed at the Senior Center, and continued to combat the limitations of public perception as, "the senior bus."

In from the Cold

Image was by far a secondary concern. Getting buses on the road each morning took precedent. South Dakota winters can see temperatures dipping down to 25 below, and Huron Area Senior Center's transit crew had to arrive in time to thaw brakes and wheelchair lifts and warm up the vehicles.



“We had to come to work an hour ahead just to start the vehicles and chip ice off the windows,” remembers Mack. In 1997, Huron city officials saw an opportunity to match a recently vacated fire truck bay at City Hall with a fleet of transit vehicles struggling against the elements.

“For the first time in our history, we could have vehicles inside at night,” recalls Mack. “And there was even a drain!” Mack shared her enthusiasm for the advancement in the agency’s newsletter, describing for community readers the experience of a new home.

“I remember being in the upstairs office, and hearing this ‘pluck, pluck, pluck,’” she says. “As I came downstairs to investigate, I realized it was the sound of ice melting off the vehicles. It was the best sound! Imagine. Starting the day, and the vehicles aren’t frosty. And they started! You couldn’t help but be excited to come to work.”

People’s Transit was now located on a main artery through town. When the doors of the fire truck bay were opened, residents could see the buses. It was a new presence for the transit system in the community.

“Ridership grew by leaps and bounds,” says Mack. “The public was realizing that we’re not just the senior bus.”

The system added several more vehicles to their fleet, squeezing as many as possible into the fire truck bay each evening. As the Millennium approached, City Hall offices planned a move to a refurbished, accessible building. The old structure was to be demolished. People’s Transit had to find a new home — this time, one of its own.

A Risk Worth Taking

A federal transportation earmark in 2000 set this new course in motion. The transit provider’s Board explored the possibility of a brand new facility, and the possibilities it would offer.

“It was an interesting journey,” says Huron City Commissioner David McGirr. “We had no model to follow, and the rules weren’t clear.”

After identifying an appropriate empty lot, the City coalesced a building committee, and McGirr worked with city civil engineer, Mike Wever, to develop a design.

“This was our first transit project. We had to look at truck facilities for ideas. We had lots of questions. Should we have a diagonal or a drive-through?” remembers McGirr. “Mike would put the ideas in Autocad, do a printout and then we’d pick it apart.”

To the project McGirr brought several years of commitment to People’s Transit as the city’s liaison to the system’s Board.

“I had worked with Sandy, and I knew the system’s needs,” says McGirr. “Certainly, we were all nervous. We’d never done this before. We were all thinking the same thing: How much trouble are we getting ourselves into? But we also all knew it was a risk worth taking.”

Dealing with a northern climate, the building had to be energy efficient to be economical.

“People’s Transit needed to be able to manage its expenses,” says McGirr. “We came up with a design that was twice as big as the fire truck bay, with utilities only half the cost.”

To access the federal investment dollars, People’s Transit needed to secure local share. To achieve the necessary local investment, they were creative. A community auction with the Modern Woodman of America raised \$2,300. A grant from the Griffith Foundation added additional revenue. And to finalize the financing, People’s Transit secured a loan from a local federal credit union — and then secured a lower-interest loan from the Community Transportation Development Fund to pay it off.

“Building a station like this one is central to People’s Transit and its mission of moving people,” says Patrick Kellogg of the Community Transportation Development Fund. “We’re proud to have played a role in such a significant project.”

The city of Huron provided in-kind contributions. In addition to the design efforts, Huron officials cleared the chosen lot, provided grade fill, ran water and sewer lines and performed surveying.

“We felt very comfortable entering into a partnership with People’s Transit,” explains McGirr. “We feel that whenever we help them, our money is leveraged much more than what we could do ourselves. We know it’s a good investment.”

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While the new building was ready for occupancy in May 2001, the project's work was not complete. Mack did not let a lack of funds deter her vision.

"We only had so much money to work with, but we wanted green around the building. We added landscaping on our own. We wanted to improve the area," says Mack. "We're next to a residential area. In fact, at the fence line is one of our riders." Moving 20 tons of rock and planting grass, People's Transit set an open house date for July.

"We had green grass. I even mowed it before the opening. We brought in park benches for seating. Kids brought their parents. Senior center residents and workers showed up. The Mayor and city and county commissioners were there. We served our famous bus cookies and had a cake with a picture of the new building on it," says Mack, describing the celebration. "This had been my dream from the beginning."

The new facility, a model for other communities in the state, marked 30 years of transit service in Beadle County, and People's Transit continues to expand.

"Now we just have to determine where to grow next," says Mack.

"We're Here to Stay"

Mayor Mary Pearson says the transit facility gives People's Transit a certain degree of independence and individuality, but the service's importance to the community long preceded a new sign on a new building.

"People's Transit has been a vital part of our community, no matter where they were," she emphasizes. "They have always given 110 percent, with or without a building. People don't go to them. They go to the people." The commitment, she says, will play an important role in the area's future.

"We are anticipating our population to grow to 18,000 by 2030," says Pearson. "People's Transit will grow right along with the community."

In addition to its service, the People's Transit facility itself has an impact on the community."

"We had a square block of land with three-foot high weeds and brush," says McGirr, describing the project's palette. "With our work as a stimulus, surrounding property owners cleaned up their act. The project has brought real improvement to the neighborhood."

Mack sees the potential to bring even more to Huron.

"We're on our own now," says Mack. "People go by and see us working. We have a new responsibility. It's our opportunity to be a permanent presence and a strong leader in the community. The staff is out there constantly cleaning and sweeping. We're out there giving extra hours to do yard work because when someone goes by and says, 'Wow. That looks great,' it makes a difference," emphasizes Mack. "We want people in the community to be as proud as we are."

Pride and good service go hand-in-hand.

"Transit service is a critical element in our infrastructure," emphasizes McGirr. "Without People's Transit, there would be a lot of people here living a lower standard of life. If ever they went away, I don't know how we'd replace them."

Mack puts any such fears to rest.

"We're here to stay." 🚌

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