Of Wyoming, a former governor once said, “We’re a whole bunch of little towns spread across vast distances and connected by ribbons of highway.” Providing public and community transportation in Wyoming, with its vast grasslands, mountains and sparse population, presents a unique set of challenges.

Wind River Transit Authority Manager Sean Solan knows all too well the challenge of moving people in Wyoming. And he knows the value of a state-of-the-art station in helping to better serve local residents.

“From the moment it opened in 1999, our station has allowed us to better and more safely serve the residents of Fremont County,” says Solan. “Now we’re even looking to expand and increase our service.”
Wind River Transit is headquartered in Riverton (pop. 9,300). The agency was launched in 1996 and serves all of Fremont County in central Wyoming — a county that stretches across more than 9,000 square miles yet has a total population of 35,000. Such a dispersed population creates great distances for transit trips. The winters in this part of the country can be severe.

“I believe the role of public transportation is to remove barriers to mobility,” says Solan. “In Wyoming the barriers are tough. Our service includes gravel roads, dirt roads and even no roads at all in some places. We provide fixed-route service for jobs, schools and pre-schools and on-demand shuttle service for medical, social and recreational purposes.”

Last year Wind River Transit provided nearly 160,000 trips — or almost four trips to every county resident.

If ever there was a successful transit service in dire need of a top-notch station to house and maintain its vehicles, it was Wind River. And in July 1999, the agency celebrated the grand opening of a 6,000-square foot facility to house its 16 vehicles and maintenance shop. The new structure is a far cry from the dirt lot upon which the agency once parked its buses.

Finding a Better Home

The Wind River Transit Authority was founded in 1996 by a joint powers board comprised of Fremont County mayors and county commissioners. The system’s original home was within the building the county uses to maintain its highway vehicles and equipment. The agency’s buses were parked outside.

“We had a tough time starting the diesel buses on really cold mornings,” recalls Solan. “But even then, I knew that that building was just temporary for us. We were going to find a better home. That was always our plan.”

At its inception, the agency operated 12 vehicles and provided 85,000 annual trips. Today, Wind River deploys 18 buses and last year served nearly 160,000 passengers. Solan attributes the system’s success to his employees. He also acknowledges that the operation’s facility has played a major role in its success.

“Our people are our greatest asset,” says Solan. “They are dedicated and tireless in their pursuits, and Fremont County is the beneficiary of this excellence.”

Wind River Transit’s ascendance was aided in 1997 by a discretionary federal transit grant for a new facility and vehicles. The agency purchased 10 new vehicles with the federal investment that arrived in 2000. But it was the new facility’s grand opening the year before that really impacted the community and announced its permanence.

“Yes, the new vehicles were great and very necessary,” says Solan. “But the facility brought home the reality that we weren’t a temporary commitment, that we existed and had a real purpose. It gave credibility to our service.”

Solan remembers having a phone discussion about the agency’s facility needs and looking out the window as he spoke. His gaze fixed upon a build-
ing in the near distance and he decided that it was to be the operation’s new home. With its federal investment, Wind River eventually purchased the existing building and property, expanding it to accommodate the agency’s needs.

At the facility’s grand opening, U.S. Senator Craig Thomas, winner of the Community Transportation Association’s Legislative Achievement Award in 1998, saluted Wind River Transportation and recognized the vital role that the agency plays in Fremont County.

“There are many reasons to celebrate here today,” said Senator Thomas at the celebration. “The community will be grateful.”

**Wow!**

The first time Solan took a group of his riders through the new facility, with its storage capacity for all of the agency’s vehicles, its bus washer and two maintenance bays, the reaction was unanimous — “Wow!”

“It was great to hear the compliments,” Solan recalls. “But they had no idea how difficult it was for us to secure the local match and really complete the project.”

Indeed, before the building could be completed, financing for the project had to be secured. The 20 percent local match that is required can be a challenge in places like Fremont County. After having exhausted all local possibilities, Solan looked to the Community Transportation Development Fund to finalize the project.

“The Association’s fund was the perfect solution for Wind River Transportation,” says Solan. “It allowed us to purchase the property and expand on the existing facility. The fund became our local match!”

“That’s what our fund is for,” says the Association’s Patrick Kellogg, “we’ve helped countless communities with match money for new vehicles and stations.”

Solan and Wind River Transportation view the facility as a starting point to improve transportation services throughout the county. He points to certain parts of the county the agency doesn’t regularly serve, and acknowledges local unmet transit need. In fact, Solan is already developing a plan to add to the not-yet-three-year-old facility.

“We’re always seeking to build upon our service and improve it,” says Solan. “Expanding our current facility would allow us to serve more people. Our passion to succeed is fueled by the needs of the people.”

**A Proven Record of Success**

In the three years since the facility project was completed, Wind River Transportation has continually served more passengers, more efficiently. Last year, overall ridership jumped by 35 percent. A program to provide trips to students to-and-from Central Wyoming College enjoyed a 30 percent passenger increase.

In 2002, Wind River Transportation was named the state’s Transit System of the Year by the Wyoming Public Transit Association.

“It’s a great honor and recognition,” says Solan. “Everyone here, all 19 employees, really earned the award.”

He recalls that in 1997, before the system had its new station, the agency had come close to closing the door and calling it quits. But the commitment to the community kept the operation going, and then the new building infused en-
Connecting to the Past... and Future

By Scott Bogren

Nova Scotia juts out into the powerful North Atlantic, exposed to its storms, swells and seas. Not surprisingly, it is a peninsula very much connected to the water and thus transportation history here is typically that of the maritime variety. But not always.

Passenger rail once held an important place in Nova Scotia, ferrying residents and visitors alike between Yarmouth, Halifax and Sydney, and the hundreds of smaller towns in between. It also connected Nova Scotia to the rest of Canada. Today, however, the last real vestiges of this once-vibrant rail service are the picturesque stations that in several cases now serve as museums — monuments to a service that once was.

In rural Nova Scotia, too, Great Stations — like these pictured in Louisburg and Musquodoboit Harbor — that once were the very center of their communities are finding new life. In this respect, Nova Scotia is not unlike many other areas of North America. A dedicated few transit historians keep passenger rail alive through their commitment to local museums, many of which are housed in rescued stations.
David Ellis

Complimenting the Community

As part of the downtown redevelopment program, every effort was made to preserve nearby buildings. A few structures that were immediately adjacent to the station could not be saved, however, and were demolished to create a new public open space. The community has embraced this area, which has hosted summertime farmer’s markets, evening concerts, Culpeper’s Train Days celebration and the community’s Christmas tree. The open space now anchors the eastern end of downtown, balancing the County Courthouse on the opposite side of town. The Town is considering a suitable statuary or civic monument for the space. To help preserve the railroad heritage of the neighborhood, the Norfolk Southern Railroad donated an old, wooden caboose, which has been installed opposite the freight end of the station. The historic, red caboose has become a focal point of the station’s plaza.

In the past year, additional Transportation Enhancement funds were secured to rehabilitate the freight portion of the Culpeper Station. This half of the structure is a large open room that is essentially unchanged from the station’s construction. The restoration will preserve the wooden frame ceiling, brick walls and large wooden doors while transforming the space into a series of community meeting rooms. The original freight scale has been preserved and will be included in one of the rooms.

Concurrently with the station renovation project, Culpeper Renaissance began a downtown façade preservation program in partnership with local property owners. Grants and loans, matched with private-sector funds, have successfully transformed nearly all of the nearby storefronts.

A Model of Endurance

The mixed-use development exemplified by the Culpeper Station is certainly a model for other redevelopment of passenger rail and bus stations in communities around the country.

As Culpeper prepares to celebrate its rail station’s 100th birthday, few of its original builders could have guessed that this station would remain at the heart of the community despite the passage of time and the significant changes in the way Americans travel. Fewer still could have predicted such a bright future for the great little station that might best be called Endurance.

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The Culpeper Chamber of Commerce, which was an active partner in the project, helped ensure its success by relocating its offices to the station and locating its new Culpeper Visitor’s Center in the former ticket office. Visitors driving into Culpeper are directed to the center, which dispenses information and brochures on local attractions, by signs posted on all major highways. The center is the starting point for walking tours of the historic section of town and also serves as a safe, indoor, weather-protected waiting area for rail passengers. The Chamber’s conference room is located in the former waiting room, and is available to the community at no cost. Although Amtrak does not sell tickets at the station, they are available at a nearby travel agent.