

EAST CHICAGO, INDIANA: Free-Fare Transit In A
High Density, Industrialized Area

Three years after the termination of a privately owned transit service, the City of East Chicago, Indiana, implemented a somewhat unusual, municipal, fixed-route bus system in late 1973. The system is unusual because it is a free-fare service and is financed entirely by federal revenue sharing funds. With only a small transit staff, which lacked specific transit expertise or experience, a limited but adequate three-route bus service was created to serve the needs of the large transit-dependent population of this blue collar community. The system was devised with a minimum of help from professional consultants, and without sophisticated routing, scheduling, or marketing plans.

Located 20 miles southeast of Chicago, East Chicago, with a population of 47,000, would appear to be a natural setting for public transit. Thirty-three percent of its population is carless, 9% is elderly, 60% is Black and Spanish speaking, and the median family income is below the national standard. Coupled with its density of 4,400 people per square mile (or 16,500 when considering only residential land), these characteristics would indicate that East Chicago could support fixed route bus service. Nevertheless, East Chicago was without any intra-urban public transportation from 1970-1973.

Previously, municipal bus service had been provided to East Chicago residents by the Shore Line Transit Company (SLTC), a private company operating out of nearby Hammond, Indiana. This service was part of an intercity system and ran on fixed routes on the main streets of East Chicago. Like many other transit companies, however, SLTC was soon confronted with a myriad of problems - including increased labor costs, capital expenditures, and a low patronage level (East Chicago's population declined 19% from 1960-1970.) Faced with the increasing economic losses because of these circumstances, the SLTC management made the decision to terminate local bus service in 1970.

After the closing of the SLTC bus routes, East Chicago city residents were left with inadequate intraurban transportation. Although the local taxi service remained, fares were prohibitively high for most residents, and service was limited (4 vehicles) and undependable. The remaining intercity service which provided express bus routes to Chicago was of limited use to the city's transit dependent population who had come to rely on local shops and services in East Chicago and nearby Hammond and Whiting for their daily needs.

Recognizing the need for local transit service, and highly cognizant of its political ramifications, the present mayor, Robert Pastrick, made it one of his campaign promises to restore bus service to the city. Consequently, when Pastrick was elected mayor in 1972, the restoration of the transit service was made one of the administration's priorities. Less than a year later, this promise was fulfilled in December of 1973 when the Mayor announced the formation of the East Chicago Bus Transit Authority (ECBTA), the city's first municipally-owned and operated bus service.

ECBTA transit system characteristics are summarized at the end of this report. The fleet is comprised of five 25-seat twin coach buses (Figure 1) and one 12-seat van (used to transport deaf children). The Transit Authority employs 16 drivers, 9 of whom are full time, uses union labor, and pays the drivers \$4.00 per hour. Service is provided on 3 routes, six days a week (Monday thru Saturday), from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thus far, the buses have been well utilized throughout the day, with higher utilization between 10-11 a.m., 1-2 p.m., and 4-5 p.m. In 1974 the system served approximately 300,000 passengers, primarily the elderly and young population of the city.

The ECBTA differs from the former private transit service in that its routes cover most of the residential parts of the city. Its buses are small enough to go down the residential streets. The East Chicago system's three routes are Marktown (1 bus and 30 minute headways), Whiteoak, the most popular route (2 buses and 40 minute headways), and Roxanna (2 buses and 40 minute headways). Intersecting at two hubs, one in each main section of the city, the three routes provide convenient access to all residential areas of the town. In addition, routing is such that 87% of ECBTA's patrons live within 1/4 of a mile from the nearest bus stop.

Like its predecessor, the East Chicago bus system is relatively expensive to operate, costing the city over one-quarter of a million dollars a year for the 5-bus general system. Unlike its predecessor, however, the city-run system is not dependent on revenue generated by its patrons. Instead, federal revenue sharing funds have completely underwritten the cost of the service to date.

The use of the general revenue sharing funds has allowed the city transit system to remain fare-free since its inception. Although the fare-free system has its obvious benefits for the transit dependent, it has not been without problems. Initially, the free fare system encouraged excessive joyriding by the bus system's teenage clientele, but this problem was soon solved by the provision of passes for teenagers which limited them to two rides per



Figure 1. East Chicago Transit Vehicle

day. On the other hand, however, the free fare system has resulted in a relatively crime free service due to the absence of fareboxes on the buses.

Despite the relative success of the East Chicago bus service in achieving its intended purposes, it would be misleading to infer that the city-owned and operated system has produced the best of all possible services. On the contrary, it must be pointed out that the bus service operates at slow speeds, on circuitous routes criss-crossed by train tracks, and there is a conspicuous absence of back-up vehicles in case of a breakdown. Additionally, although 'special service' vehicles under Headstart, CETA, and two elderly-service programs provide pre-arranged transit for the elderly and handicapped, there are no accommodations for handicapped persons on ECFTA's regular service routes. Both the elderly and handicapped have also voiced considerable dissatisfaction with the limited area coverage of the general service.

At present, ECFTA service is restricted to the East Chicago city limits. Consequently, it cannot provide service to nearby but outlying shopping centers in the neighboring towns of Hammond and Whiting. Moreover, its limited hours of operation (10 a.m. to 6 p.m.) precludes it from serving a potentially high morning demand and eliminates the possibility of a transportation alternative for the more than 60,000 persons working in the city's heavy industrial mills. There is no other public transportation to the mills, and the plants draw workers from a large area, thus causing congestion at shift changes as well as worker traffic on surrounding residential streets. Although negotiations for transit service to the area's largest mill (Inland Steel) are underway, Inland has thus far been unwilling to participate financially since many of its workers reside outside of East Chicago. Such a service would also require ECFTA to purchase additional buses.

At present, concerned citizen groups as well as the East Chicago Transit management have recognized the need to further restore and expand the coverage of the bus system so that it can provide service to the mills and to other commuters who desire to utilize transit for their early morning peak periods. In the future, it is envisioned that commuter express service will be provided to at least two of the steel mills in East Chicago, and negotiations are currently underway to expand the service to include the neighboring towns of Hammond and Whiting. Although a Regional Transit Authority has been recently formed to provide integrated service in the area, it does not have the taxing power needed to ensure integrated service.

Despite the bureaucratic problems encountered in trying to bring about integrated service, ECBTA has been relatively responsive to transit needs and desires as articulated by concerned citizens and patrons. At present, it is in the process of altering its routes, headways, and time of operation to increase service availability and convenience while reducing travel time. Hours of operation, for example, will be expanded from the present 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. to 7 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. schedule. In addition, routes will be altered so as to provide an express bus from the local train station to the central business district (at 25 minute headways) while two longer routes (at 45 minute headways) will remain in operation on the city's residential streets. Finally, although the system is still constrained by the lack of vehicles, ECBTA is presently in the process of preparing a Transit Development Plan (TDP). When completed and approved, the TDP will make the city eligible to apply for capital and operating assistance from the Federal government. Such assistance would enable the ECBTA to increase fleet size and expand the service level.

To date, East Chicago represents an example of how transit service may be provided despite formidable institutional and financial constraints. Without the benefit of either capital or operating assistance from the Federal or state government, East Chicago has shown an innovative use of general revenue sharing funds. The use of these 'uncategorized' federal dollars allowed a relatively quick implementation of a transit system without the immediate need to meet the planning requirements which are attached to Federal grants. In the future, the expected acquisition of capital and operating funds, coupled with the possibility of a Regional Transit Authority with taxing power, promises to further improve and integrate the service level for East Chicago and its surrounding communities. To date, however, East Chicago has initiated, and continues to provide, a minimum level of transit service for its transit dependent population.

SUMMARY OF EAST CHICAGO TRANSIT SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Population in service area: 46,966
Population density: 4,000 persons per square mile
Median household income: \$9,194
Cars owned per household: n/a
Percent carless households: 33%
Percent transit dependent: 42%
Average distance to service: 87% of residents live
within 1/4 mile

COVERAGE AND SERVICE

Number of routes: 3
Average route length (one-way): 9 miles
Average route time (one-way): 45 minutes
Time of service and average headways:
Monday thru Saturday 10:00 am to 6:00 pm
45 minute headways
Number, types and average capacity of vehicles:
general service 5 twin coaches 25 passenger
special service 4 vans
Number of vehicles in service: 5

COST AND PRODUCTIVITY

Operating cost per month: n/a
Vehicle miles per day: 1,500
Vehicle hours per day: 40
Driver hours per day: 40
Operating cost per vehicle hour: \$14.50
Operating cost per vehicle mile: n/a
Operating cost per passenger trip (one-way): \$0.57
Passengers per vehicle hour: 26
Passengers per vehicle mile: n/a
Driver wage rate per hour: \$4.00

REVENUE AND SUBSIDY

Fares: free
Revenue per passenger: \$0.00
Subsidy per passenger: \$0.57
Operating ratio: undefined
Lease or buy vehicles: Buy
Funding: n/a

RIDERSHIP

Average passengers per weekday: 1,050

Ridership growth rate: n/a

Ridership composition: elderly, youth, handicapped

Trip purpose: shopping, recreational





