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Small City Transit

BREMERTON, WASHINGTON:

Privately Operated
Subscription Bus Service
to an Industrial Site



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Preface

This document was prepared by the Transportation Systems Center (TSC) as part of the information dissemination function of the Office of Service and Methods Demonstrations, Urban Mass Transportation Administration. This case study is one of thirteen studies of public transit systems in small communities and is intended to serve as an information resource for other communities in the process of planning or considering public transportation.

The information presented in this document is based on a visit to the site, interviews and phone conversations with the principals involved, and operating records obtained during 1975. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of local officials and transit operators at all of the sites selected for study, and of the TSC staff in compiling the information gained from these studies and assisting in its interpretation.

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Subscription Bus Service To An Industrial Site

Although high volume subscription bus service for work trips is neither unique nor new, examples of this kind of service in small communities have been rare. Bremerton, Washington, a small city with a population of 35,000 and the location of a major U.S. Naval shipyard, exemplifies a small town with a large industry drawing employees from a wide area. A private bus company has been operating a profitable subscription bus service transporting residents to work at the shipyard for the last fifteen years. An annual total of about 500,000 transit passenger trips to work are made by residents of Bremerton and the surrounding rural area. Documented examples of similar subscription bus services can be found only in cities such as San Francisco, Detroit, or St. Louis -- all cities with a relatively large population (greater than 500,000). Possibly, a prime reason for this conspicuous absence of service in smaller cities is related to factors associated with their size -- such as the absence of high density residential areas (collector points) or the lack of high density central business districts or major employers (destination points).

While the bus company also operates a fixed route system over seven routes within the ten square mile town, this report focuses on the subscription service, and operating data included refers to that portion of the transit system only.

Bremerton is located on a peninsula 15 miles across the Puget Sound from the city of Seattle. The Puget Sound Naval Shipyard is the only major employer in the area, with 10,000 workers on 300 acres of land. Consequently, it is a large traffic generator of the area and provides a high density destination point needed to implement subscription bus service.

The Bremerton Charleston Transit (BCT), a private carrier, has provided subscription service for shipyard workers over the last 15 years (similar service was first implemented during World War II). Although the number of routes vary according to demand, at present BCT operates 24 routes with an average length of 20 miles. The present fare level for the service is 35-50 cents, depending on the length of the route. For their convenience, workers may also purchase weekly books of tickets for the service.

One of the main reasons for the success of the subscription service has been the low labor costs incurred by BCT. The drivers, who are all full time workers at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, are only part-time workers for the bus company. They hold an intermediate license, are union members, and are paid \$10 a day. The service operates with the drivers starting out from their homes in the morning and picking up fellow workers along routes arranged according to the riders residences. The buses are then parked at the shipyard for the duration of the work day, then driven by the shipyard workers/drivers for the return trip and parked for the night in their driveway, ready for the next day's journey.

The infrequent utilization of the buses, which sit in either the shipyard parking lots or the driveway of the drivers at night, would seem to make the buses highly unproductive. This low utilization is partially offset however, by the use of older 41-seat vehicles. Because of the low mileage put on the buses during the week, little maintenance is required, and thus the buses are brought to the garage only once a week.

Planning of the "BCT commuter express", as the service is called, has not required an extensive marketing plan, nor has it been necessary to develop sophisticated scheduling, routes, and fare structures. Instead, workers hear about it through word of mouth and new routes may be served when requested by enough employees (BCT permits a trial period of approximately 30 days for new routes). Although routing may seem to be potentially complicated, there has been no formal planning since (as the manager points out), "The drivers know where the people are". Thus routing, scheduling, and fare collection procedures are determined solely by the users of the service with as little outside interference from BCT management as possible.

Thus far, the informality and flexibility of the Bremerton subscription bus service has benefited both the users of the service and the company. While the flexibility has allowed the service to be highly responsive to users needs and desires, the informality has minimized the need for costly management time. Consequently, the operation of the service has been profitable, with the buses operating at full capacity despite the absence of planning, marketing, or sophisticated routing by management. Additionally, the use of older buses and the unique part-time driving arrangement has further reduced the cost of the service to both management and its patrons. Together these various factors have allowed Bremerton, unlike many other small cities, to

provide a service which is flexible, informal, and self-supporting, and thus highly responsive to the transportation needs of area residents.

SUMMARY OF BREMERTON TRANSIT SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Population in service area: 35,000
Population density: 3,600 persons per square mile
Median household income: n/a
Cars owned per household: n/a
Percent carless households: n/a
Percent transit dependent: n/a
Average distance to service: 1/4 mile

COVERAGE AND SERVICE

Number of routes: Changes, presently 24
Average route length (one-way): n/a
Average route time (one-way): 20 min.
Time of service: 1 trip starting 6:30 a.m. and
1 starting 4:30 p.m., Monday - Friday
Average headways: 45 min.
Number, types, and average capacity of vehicles:
27-28 buses; 40-41 seats
Number of vehicles in service: 28

COST AND PRODUCTIVITY

Vehicle miles per day: 40
Vehicle hours per day: 1.5
Driver hours per day: 1.5
Operating cost per vehicle hour: \$9.16
Operating cost per vehicle mile:
Operating cost per passenger trip: \$0.17
Passengers per vehicle hour: 53
Passengers per vehicle mile:
Driver wage rate per day: \$10.00

REVENUE AND SUBSIDY

Fares: 35-50¢ depending on length of route
Revenue per passenger: \$0.21
Subsidy per passenger: \$0.00
Operating ratio (cost/revenue): \$0.80
Lease or buy vehicles: Lease
Funding: n/a

RIDERSHIP

Average passengers per weekday: 2,240

Ridership growth rate: ridership has increased,
but there are no figures

Ridership composition: all riders work at PSNSY

Trip purpose: work only



