Transportation Summit Recap

Summary

Thursday, April 27th, at the EASTCONN headquarters in Hampton, Connecticut, invited participants took part in the first-ever HackCT Summit hosted by the Nonprofit Alliance of Northeast Connecticut (NANC). This event aimed at fostering innovation and collaboration to solve transportation challenges in northeast Connecticut. This union of various stakeholders impacted by and influential in the area's transportation infrastructure (policymakers, transportation experts, community advocates, and tech professionals) made possible a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to these challenges than has occurred previously.

Run of the Event

Why are we here?- 3-min video presentation & brief lecture
Set the stage/frame the conversation and discuss challenges

- Forgotten corner of CT
- Need for improved transportation infrastructure
- Hackathon as method to identify solutions

What is a Hackathon?- 3-min video presentation & brief lecture

- Examples of successful hackathons worldwide
    - How they work
    - Demonstrate credibility of hackathons
        - Topics they can tackle
        - Outputs can look like

What is our Current Challenge? - 5-min video presentation & discussion

- John Filchak spoke to several pre-defined transportation challenges
    - Attendees asked follow-up questions to address each challenge

Working Lunch Breakout Sessions - 1hr+ small group brainstorming on select topic

- Attendees self-identified topics they wished to engage
    - Ideated -Moderators took discussion notes
        - Problems
        - Steps to Address
    - Pledges - members listed what they would like to contribute as resources

Sharing

- Moderators shared recaps of brainstorming from each table (details below)

Closing remarks

Next steps and request to complete satisfaction survey (sent in subsequent email)

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Outcomes

1. Last Mile Solutions

Much of the region has an aging population with limited access to transportation, making retail and health visits challenging, especially if they cannot drive or do not have access to a car. Microtransit and ride-sharing services are unattractive due to the low population density, and transportation companies that have tried to provide taxi services have met with poor public perception.

The challenge is that a certain volume of passengers is needed to make these services work efficiently. With increased mobility, there would be enhanced employment, economic and educational opportunities.

Problems

Areas of concern include communication between an employee and an employer; sharing of the importance of maintaining schedules for medical appointments based on the needs of an individual; data about what is available and be shared with an individual and amongst agencies.

Other concerns involve drafting a letter for employees to share with an employer or potential employer about their transportation needs/challenges if they are hired and training individuals in how to 'manage up' by articulating their needs. Also mentioned were targeted pockets of funds to meet ADA guidelines, as well as including alternative providers in finding a solution, car sharing, and volunteer drivers.

Pledges

Writing a draft letter for employees to clarify expectations with employers, and sharing information with people so people know more about existing services. There was also a pledge to collaborate with our partners in the community to provide transportation services- perhaps a daily rotation of transportation responsibilities.

2. GPS on Buses

There is the possibility of using GPS technology on buses to provide updated information to riders about bus routes, times, and stops. This would require agreement among transit districts and bus providers to initiate, build, and support. Using the information gathered through GPS, a single platform could serve as a broker for rides, allowing riders to be directed to the most efficient means of transportation to and from their destinations. Finally, route planners would leverage predictability and remove the riders' uncertainty in transportation by improving transparency and suggesting coordinated travel itineraries that would more effectively serve a greater number of riders.

Problems

There are unused or under-used vehicles owned by transportation and service providers alike: what agreement could leverage this fleet, especially in light of historical territorialism? Questions such as which organization(s) would own the process of collaboratively developing

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the system that optimizes bus routes and provides a single point of contact for riders to get access to the transportation they seek. How would costs be shared? Who hires and houses the platform and any dispatch staff brought on? Additionally, there is a desire to increase youth ridership.

The first step would be to identify participating stakeholders and respective resources (fleets, data, platforms, staff, drivers, large-scale employers, municipal leaders, etc.). Secondly, deciding who would create, oversee, execute the integrated system, and address the challenge of finding technologists to integrate existing GPS/dispatch systems. Ai and other emerging technologies could play a role in supporting operations and finding efficiencies.

Pledges

EASTCONN is looking to its partners and connections to grow the number of participants in the upcoming hackathon and offering to moderate. Others offered to advocate for the hackathon and facilitate groups.

3. Cross-border Initiatives

Connecticut is home to some of the wealthiest and poorest pockets in the country and does not offer a structure for mutual collaboration and cross-border transportation. This state is divided in a million ways – most notably legislatively, economically, and physically. There are 8 counties, 9 COGs, 6 regional educational service centers, and 15 transit districts, which do not all interconnect and line up.

Worcester and Providence are as large as any city in CT, and this region is as close to them as it is to Hartford. Connecting this part of the state to the rest of Connecticut and neighboring states will have a vast impact on the economy and mobility of residents.

Problems

The siloing and lack of collaborative connections in this area of the state are foremost in perpetuating existing limitations in transportation, opportunities for economic growth, etc. Expansion and enhancement of existing infrastructure is predicated on cooperation which would allow the flexibility to provide services in a way that promotes mobility, integrates communities, and provides for a healthier region.

By first examining the borders, the reasons that more pan-state transit isn't present, and the geographic characteristics here we can begin to parse out the simple solutions from those that require more leg work and time. Our disperse populations all seek to travel in different directions, so the development of meaningful solutions necessitates data-driven expenditure of limited funds. Remote and Online ride purchasing needs to be made available for riders in all regions; fares and routes ought to be universal to promote use.

Pledges

Pledges included everything from identifying funding streams, technology to connect platforms and transportation providers, as well as solutions involving ride availability. Any changes made will be posted in the ECTC mobility guide to promote awareness. These pledges need to be better articulated so that we know what to expect from these members. Follow-up is required.

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4. Walkable Streets & Bike Lanes

There are 16 towns and 11 villages in NECOG, which are among the poorest in the state – covering 1300 miles of road. There is a spotty network of sidewalks that do not currently abide by ADA standards and haven't been updated in years. The towns are very spread out and funding is a challenge.

Problems

With little existing infrastructure, updating unsafe walkways is very costly. The lack of connectivity between what exists adds doubt to the hope of meeting safety standards. Participants discussed lower-cost solutions, such as widening the shoulder on existing roads and performing maintenance of existing sidewalks. An increase in the density of housing would contribute to the funds and public desire to improve the walkability around existing sites. Zoning of property in this region is seen as a challenge, but having more mixed-use development would expand the tax base, improve resident numbers, and would naturally contribute to economic development. Other low-cost solutions included striping roads, improving lighting, providing education to commuters, and even reexamining parking requirements, but there is a grant for Safe Streets available. Centralization of data from different sources is seen as a clear first step in pursuing these funds. Universities can provide grant writers to help to fund these projects and develop language to build public support.

Pledges

Landuse regulations and modality, municipal leader support, and health comparison data

5. Infrastructure Act

There is a federal program that offers funding for projects, including roads, bridges, mass transportation, and airports. The program is set to expire in the next 4-5 years, and there are currently grant cycles available. Many towns and cities lack the expertise and the 20% match needed to apply for these grants, which are complex and competitive.

Public support would come for the 'right' project, so it is critically important to inform the public to generate interest. The program could have a significant lasting impact on the safety, economy, and perception of Connecticut.

Problems

Funding and how to identify projects were the general concerns. Coming up with matching funds, grant writing resources, and collaboration with historically disparate entities summed the deeper conversation. Opportunity and appetite for combining efforts was seen as the likely best way to overcome the hurdles: revenue sharing, cross-organizational partnerships, and de-siloing of data. Additionally, leveraging education centers (e.g. UConn is a source for grant writers and data), legacy partners, and community health workers seemed appropriate for brining a unified vision forward.

Pledges

UConn Technical assets, and various data resources