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TECHNOLOGY

Transit — Here It Is

BY FRED JANDT ON FEB 16, 2009

MASS TRANSIT

It was a cold and windy day when I visited Madison's Metro Transit. Sure, cold kind of goes with the description when you live in Wisconsin in the winter, but it was about -10 F on the thermometer — and probably -20 F with wind chill — when I looked outside that morning. I figured I would get to see the buses in the maintenance bays or perhaps just tour some of the office facilities, but Metro's general manager, Chuck Kamp, had other ideas.

A Subzero Tour

"I'm dressed and ready to go," Kamp said (as you can see by our cover) with a smile. "For me this is the perfect day to show the system when we're really challenged."

And we did tour the system like any other rider would. We waited for a bus at a stop in the cold, got on board and rode a bus to the state capitol building and returned in the same manner.

And what surprised me the most about our trek to use transit that freezing morning was that not only were people on the buses, they were packed.

"That has to do with the support for public transportation," Kamp says. "This community supports it in terms of ridership and it also supports it in terms of the taxes that support it."

One of the ways that Kamp has noticed the support for transit in Madison is the number of choice riders the system has attracted. He notes that the Wisconsin capital is very environmentally conscious, which may explain some support, but there may be another — economic — reason.

"If they are parking at one of the ramps we will ride by downtown, it is \$120 [a month]. And to get a bus pass it's \$47 a month. In my previous community, to ride a bus for a month was about \$60 and you could get a parking pass for a month for \$20.

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"Where you work in a community where the transit and parking policies are looked at together, I think that's an example where you can build public transportation support," Kamp says.

Putting Down Roots

Despite its unenviable winters, Madison is one of the best places to live in the United States. Recently rated by Forbes magazine as the best place in the country to get a job, Madison has half the unemployment rate of the rest of the country. And it has a growing transit system. As any transit director will tell you, even though many transit executives move around quite a bit you do tend to put down roots in your community.

Kamp has had that opportunity a couple times over his career and has been happy with the decision each time. First entering the transit industry through a management internship program with the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), Kamp was allowed to do different assignments in transit over a two-year program. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do, but he knew it would be in transportation.

"I've got transportation in my blood. I have a great grandfather who worked for the railroads. So I just think it's in my system," Kamp says.

Kamp took a few assignments with the program and eventually ended up at the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). Ending his internship program, Kamp stayed on with WMATA and as he says it, "I've never looked back."



Spending the 1980s in Washington, D.C., Kamp would move back to the Midwest in 1991 to become general manager of Valley Transit in Appleton, Wis. Spend 15 years in any location and you'll put down roots, so when you decide to make a move, it's a big decision, as it was when Kamp considered the open general manager position in Madison in 2006. Casually chatting with his wife over dinner, he discussed the open position, but was cautious because their youngest child was still in high school.

"[My wife] knows public transportation pretty well," Kamp admits. "And she said isn't it true that some people in transit manager jobs, they take it and then

they are there 20 years. And I go, well yeah.

"Well so the Madison job might not open up for another 20 years?

"And I said, well that's true. This might be the only time it opens up."

So Kamp decided to throw his name into the hat for the Madison Metro Transit general manager opening and when he was offered the position they began planning their move, but that also meant moving their entire family.

"At the time [our son] was a little hesitant to move. I moved while I was in high school and it was a hard move for me, but I didn't have a choice. My dad got transferred and so he would have lost his job otherwise," Kamp says.

Kamp says his son had a couple conditions — helping choose the house they would move to and moving to a school district he knew somebody in — but one thing led to another and they moved.

"And if anything our greatest fear of moving — my son's transition — was the least of our fears because he has built social networks quicker than us."

"He now tells us this is one of the best things he's ever done — to actually do the move and understand it's not such a scary thing, it's actually an opportunity."

Small Town, Big City

With his experience working in both the nation's capital and now Wisconsin's state capital, I wondered if there were any similarities between the two locations.

"There really are a lot of similarities," Kamp says.

Using the Yogi Berra quote, our differences are similar, Kamp says that's how he feels about the two capitals, they are different, but they're similar.

"Madison has a smaller town feel, but it has big city

benefits like top-rate entertainment, a top-rate university. Interesting things you can be involved with at the university that my wife and I are just learning about.

"It's easier to do those things in a smaller community I think, but the community is very politically involved. [It] has a cultural environmental stewardship being the home of Aldo Leopold who established the arboretum as part of the [University of Wisconsin]."

Transit-Oriented Development

Madison's environmental stewardship has grown to be a natural part of development around Metro Transit. Kamp says the city is beginning to see more transit-oriented development and compared to other communities its size, it is well ahead of the curve.

"There is a new development called the Sequoia Commons that is taking a kind of a strip mall which was one story and is building a mixed-use, four- or five-story development with residential, library, shopping, coffee shops. That's very much TOD and it's right at the intersection of our Route 6 and Route 18," Kamp says.

Kamp says there is dramatic development being done in an area that he calls the grey bar, "Wherever there is a grey bar [on our system map] there are so many bus routes we can't put all of the different colors."

This development based around Hilldale Mall includes residential, commercial and mixed-used developments all occurring along the grey bar corridor.

"So yes there is transit-oriented development occurring," Kamp says.

?It?s happening faster than communities our size. I can?t compare it to D.C., but it is true that in places with light rail that there is a history of really intense transit-oriented development and we?re having [that].

"I wouldn't say it's as intense as in communities with rail, but this area is so committed to transit."

Regional Transit Authority

Part of that commitment is a plan to create a regional transit authority (RTA). Currently, RTAs with regional taxing structures and regional governing boards are not allowed in Wisconsin. To create one there has to be enabling legislation created. Voters in the county in which Metro Transit operates, Dane County, want an RTA, but several surrounding communities aren't so sure.

Kamp says there is a legislative study counsel that has been created by the state legislature to study the formation of RTAs and the legislation needed to provide the statutory authority for their creation. He acknowledges that as the first step. The second step would be how the RTAs would be formed.

"There are many ways you can form an RTA. And while this is being worked out, the local communities can work on, well are we comfortable with a particular tax.

?And I would say locally, if there is a tax that?s going to be used, it seems then it?s moving in the direction of a sales tax,? Kamp says.

With the recent setbacks by transit agencies across the country funded by sales tax revenue that have seen those revenues dry up in the current economy, I asked Kamp if he was gun-shy about funding that RTA with sales tax revenue.

Kamp pointed to the state government and university as being employers somewhat buffered by downward turns in the economy, making a sales tax less cyclical than in other areas.

?So I wouldn?t say I?m gun-shy, I would say I see that as one of the strongest and most viable options, but as the state is working on legislation I would want there to be some discussion should there be more than one choice to look at this.

?A group of us went over to Michigan two years ago, and we looked at their RTAs and their enabling legislation. And one of the things we heard from all the communities we visited is if you're establishing this new statutory authority, give yourself some flexibility. Have more than just one funding source and so that? s kind of my philosophy.?

Hybrid Expansion

Madison Metro's fleet is comprised of 200 buses and 20 paratransit vehicles. Five of those buses are hybrid diesel-electrics and they are the beginning of a new trend at the system. Kamp says the vehicles are so popular there is a willingness to look at ways to spend more money for hybrids.

?Because they are green and they are viewed by the entire community as one of the more exciting things Metro is doing because of the green energy, the environmentally friendly aspects of it,? Kamp says.

And if he has his way, he is going to add dozens more hybrids to Madison's streets within the next five years.

?Right now the city has approved a five-year bus procurement plan with 42 more buses left,? Kamp says.

Kamp says with federal and local funding, Metro Transit already has in place the bus procurement secured, but they've asked for money in the pending stimulus package to bridge the difference between regular diesel buses and hybrids ? a cost of about \$200,000 per bus ? as part of the president's energy initiatives and job initiatives.

The five hybrids in Metro Transit's fleet actually have two paint schemes, the standard Metro paint scheme and a scheme based on the University of Wisconsin, whom helped the agency raise the money to purchase the vehicles.

?[The university] put money on the table and they said we would like to get this going and in exchange we have a few things we would like,? Kamp says.

?One, we'd like to have the red University of Wisconsin badger theme [on the buses]. And second, you'll see the University Transportation Services advertisements on them.?

Kamp says two of the buses sport the UW colors and get the right of first refusal on any advertising on them. They also sport the University of Wisconsin seal on the nose of the bus, making them distinctive from any direction.

Those buses stay on campus for their runs on a fareless route to get people on and off quickly and not have to worry about payment. The university also requested some added design features to speed up loading and unloading.

?The university [bus] has Manhattan-style seating where you don't have any forward facing seats in the front,? Kamp says.

?They wanted to be able to have students standing two by two so you can get big loads on this bus and they wanted the rear door to be wider so that two people can get off at once.

?So we did their red paint scheme on the seats, interior and out, different size door and different size of seating pattern to accommodate the university. And they were helping us buy the buses, so we said, yep, that's a good deal.?

The other three hybrid buses with Metro Transit's paint scheme are on routes throughout the city, turning heads as they go by.

?It's generating excitement. It is its own natural marketing tool for us,? Kamp says.

?We don't have to do anything. We bought hybrid buses and the community is coming to us. It's neat.?

Bucky Bus

While Metro Transit's hybrid buses have been a tremendous success, its Bucky Bus ? buses delivering

riders to UW sporting events and local community events ? was shut down as a result of last year?s Federal Transit Administration (FTA) charter bus changes.

Kamp has mixed feelings about the situation. On the one hand the Bucky Bus provided an important community service, but then again there were the costs associated with it, including overtime salaries to provide that service.

?I do think there was some merit to the argument that the private companies weren?t getting federal funding to do that work. And so, I felt that when the rule came out just like anything you follow the rules, you do what?s legally required,? Kamp says.

More than 50 private charter companies signed up on the FTA Web site to offer their services for charter work in the area. Kamp says this showed him there were definitely contractors who could do the work.

?And indeed, for every one of the charter work opportunities, there?s been a company to do it. And so I felt that those new rules came into effect. We were covering our costs. We were not making a profit,? Kamp says.

Kamp feels that since Metro wasn?t losing money by the loss of the service, they now had the opportunity to use the resources they had once dedicated to services like the Bucky Bus and use those resources for regular service, which helped alleviate some tight budget constraints.

Funding

Funding is a critical issue for all transit agencies, and Madison Metro Transit is no different. The agency has an approved budget for 2008, but that budget hinged on a 50-cent fare increase. Unfortunately, that fare increase isn?t approved ? yet.

?The Transit and Parking Commission (Metro?s governing board) decided to go halfway and rather than raise the fare from \$1.50 to \$2, to raise it to \$1.75,? says Kamp.

?That did leave a portion of our budget imbalanced and so the reasoning of those that are appealing this is that Metro needs to have a balanced budget, which we do. And so it?s still going through the process.?

Does the lack of a fare increase mean Metro Transit will be facing a budget deficit? Well, technically, yes, but Kamp is still hoping for an appeal of the commission?s decision.

?Right now if the Transit and Parking Commission?s approved version stays, we would be at a deficit of about \$210,000. I?m concerned about that because we?re having another snowy winter like last year where Metro needed to spend additional money for snow removal at bus stops. And I don?t see this early in the game in January that I could absorb a \$210,000 deficit. So I do think it will be helpful for the appeal process to go for it.?

Kamp says that the agency has begun looking at what a \$210,000 deficit would mean for the agency, but hopes to avoid service cuts if possible. However, with the appeal process underway, he?s waiting to hear the results of that before he starts looking at cuts.

?If [the appeal goes through], then there?s no service cuts, we have an approved budget and our budget is balanced. If it leaves it at the current Transit and Parking Commission approved level of \$1.75, we?d have to fill that \$210,000 gap and staff would look at a way to avoid doing that with service cuts.?

Unlimited Rides

One of the other points of contention for Metro Transit is its unlimited ride passes. Some have come out to say the unlimited rides gives a false sense of ridership increases, which Kamp denounces simply.

?An unlimited ride is a ride is a ride. It?s ridership.

?Unlimited ride agreements with universities and employers are a trend throughout the country. I would argue that Madison is on the leading edge of it,? Kamp says.

?So I don?t think it masks ridership. I think that our ridership that you see ? and we are very close to

breaking our all-time record either this year or next year, which was set in 1982? I think part of that's unlimited ride passes.?

The proposed budget actually includes accommodations for Metro Transit staff to broaden the unlimited pass agreements to small employers. Currently the program is only in service with the University of Wisconsin, the city of Madison, some other schools and a few major employers, but Kamp hopes that will change with the new budget. He notes that the agency has heard from several smaller employers (with 10 to 50 employers) about offering it to their companies as well.

?This is like the hybrid bus of tickets,? Kamp says.

?It's like, ?Oh I can be a green employer if I provide this to my employees.? And they understand that they're using this primarily to and from work, but on the weekend if I am using this to get to a movie or to a restaurant on State Street, the company is paying for that, too, on weekends and other times.

?So it's really an attractive financial and ridership program.?

Of course there are those that claim the unlimited ride passes are free and the transit agency is losing money over them. Kamp explains that every time a card is swiped the agency gets 95.2 cents, which will go up to \$1.10 if there is a 50-cent fare increase or \$1 a ride if it stays at 25 cents. The companies sponsoring this are billed quarterly, so it can be a hefty chunk of change for some.

But Kamp knows that criticism is just part of the job,?
We get flack no matter what we do.

?I think it's the nature of any public service certainly it is in public transit where I have experience.

?As you know you're trying to do the right things in the community. As you're trying to make changes you inevitably will get some criticism. My sense is there is an overwhelming support for what Metro is doing most of the time, not all of the time, but most of the time. And that has translated into good community and funding support for Metro, which has benefited us since.

?That's why I say the criticism has been there so it's important to listen to it to make changes based on it, but I don't think it reflects that Metro is doing the wrong thing.

?Overall I think Metro is moving in the right direction.?

Unique Advice

One thing I always ask transit directors is if they have any advice for their peers. Kamp thought for a moment and said he hears everyone in public service tell him is that every community is unique, which he definitely feels is the case for Madison.

?Just look at the geography. Where else in the United States do you have two large lakes with an isthmus and the state capital and a university right in the middle?? Kamp says.

?That's pretty unique. That means our services are different as a result of that. So the first thing to executives I would say is when you come into a community, don't assume what worked in another community is what you need to do here. The first thing to do really is to listen and to learn. That would be my advice.?

Kamp says that taking what you've learned from the existing location and combining that with your collective experience is key in answering the question, ?Now what changes should we start making??

For Madison Kamp says that was buying hybrid buses and just making transit greener.

?Have transit be greener than it already is, because it's very green, but I think it can be greener.?



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