Chapter 12

Transit Improvements
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TRANSIT IMPROVEMENTS

Transit is a critical component in this plan’s strategy for meeting mobility and air quality needs. Recommendations for expanded bus service, acquisition and preservation of transit right-of-way, and rail transit are intended to provide viable alternatives to automobile travel.

Transit is not intended to accommodate everyone’s travel needs, but it is in the public interest to make transit widely available as an alternative to single-occupant vehicle (SOV) travel. Transit is desirable for reducing congestion, which in turn reduces the need for roadway expansion projects and decreases vehicle emissions. Furthermore, transit provides travel opportunities for those for whom auto use is not a possible or preferred option.

To develop its potential, transit service must be supported by new investments. In addition, there must be incentives to encourage people to travel by transit, and policies that foster “transit friendly” land use. In fact, the effectiveness of transit services is closely related to land use patterns, both existing and future. OKI’s Regional Land Use Commission is working to address this issue (see Chapter 8).

CONNECTING THE REGION BY TRANSIT

Transit is available in the OKI region through six individually-operated bus systems (see Chapter 4). The Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority (SORTA), the largest transit provider in the region, was designed more than 30 years ago, when the City of Cincinnati was a primary destination. As the region has grown in a more dispersed development pattern with significant residential and employment growth outside the city and around the I-275 beltway, transit expansion has not kept pace.

At the present time, it is impossible to travel between certain parts of the region by transit. For instance, transit trips cannot be made between bus service areas in Newport, Kentucky, and Lebanon, Ohio, or between bus service areas in Batavia, Ohio and Lawrenceburg, Indiana. To attract more riders to transit, it is important that the separate transportation services in the region be fully connected.

The passage of the Welfare Reform Act in 1996 brought the concept of transit connectivity to the forefront. The Act has made it apparent that a concerted effort is needed on a region-wide basis to physically move people from welfare to work. The difficulties faced by central city residents in reaching suburban jobs
are known to be a major problem. At the same time, many suburban employers profess difficulties in attracting and keeping employees, often due to lack of transportation.

**Transit Agency Coordination Efforts**
The Welfare Reform Act has also served as a major catalyst for various agencies to work towards identifying ways to improve transit connectivity. SORTA and the region’s second largest transit provider, Transit Authority of Northern Kentucky (TANK), have pursued many joint projects in the past few years intended to enhance connectivity and improve service. Passengers who use both systems can now transfer much more easily than before because the systems accept each other’s reduced fare cards for senior citizens and the disabled. In addition, SORTA and TANK each sell a monthly card which gives passengers unlimited travel on both systems.

In southeastern Indiana, the Catch-A-Ride system is making efforts to create a seamless transit system. Catch-A-Ride operates service to Florence Mall on Saturdays and designated points in Cincinnati on an as needed basis. Catch-A-Ride and TANK honor each other’s transfers for reduced rates. In addition, the transit system is planning future shuttle routes to Harrison, which may connect with Metro service that operates from Harrison to downtown Cincinnati.

In Northern Kentucky, TANK has expanded their operations through a variety of services including development of ten new park-and-rides, and expanded reverse commute service to the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport and surrounding industrial parks.

**State Initiatives**
The Commonwealth of Kentucky began a coordinated transportation network in 1998 designed to provide affordable accessible transportation in all areas of the state. This effort, which is called the Human Service Transportation Delivery program, was established as a result of the governor’s Empower Kentucky initiative. The aim of the network is to provide transportation services efficiently and effectively to recipients and agencies within the Cabinet for Families and Children, Cabinet for Health Services, and the Workforce Development Cabinet. Under the program, a single transportation broker/provider manages Human Service Transportation Delivery in each of 16 regions throughout Kentucky. Transportation cost reimbursements are determined on a capitated rate system for some programs as well as a fee for service system for others. The Northern Kentucky transportation region is composed of eight counties that include Boone, Campbell, and Kenton, with service currently operated by Executive Transportation.
The program helps recipients overcome the transportation barrier to employment. The program also supports the Commonwealth’s longer-term strategic plan and welfare reform related objectives of moving service recipients to self-sufficiency.

The State of Ohio enacted House Bill 408 in 1997 which mandated that each county develop a transportation plan establishing policies regarding the transportation needs of low income residents. In developing the transportation work plan, the Board of County Commissioners is responsible for coordinating the plan with various organizations such as the county department of human services, the regional transit authority, and the community action agency. In late 1997, the Ohio Department of Human Services, under ORC Section 307.984, allocated funding to each county for developing their transportation plan. Butler County and Hamilton County Departments of Human Services wrote their plans in December 1997 addressing the transportation needs for welfare recipients and low income persons.

**Expansion of Bus Transit Service**
In June 2002, SORTA released its *MetroMoves* Regional Transit Plan which proposed expanding its bus system to serve all of Hamilton County. Currently, funding constraints limit the extent of expansion. However, through the public involvement process and SORTA’s system analysis it is evident that additional crosstown routes and service to destinations in communities along portions of the I-275 beltway are desirable.

The Transit Authority of Northern Kentucky indicates that its future plans include potential service in key east-west corridors (I-275 beltway communities and KY 536 corridor) and north-south corridors (I-71/75 and KY 9 and KY 237).

Figure 12-1 portrays the existing and recommended transit service in the region. As shown on this figure, the green lines represent the existing bus transit system and the red lines represent recommended bus transit lines. Each “recommended” line was placed on the most logical routing going from a particular origin or destination. The actual route taken by future transit developments will be determined by the individual transit operators.

It is recommended that transit operators expand their service as shown in Figure 12-1, improve service frequency and provide more express service. In addition, better service between suburban areas is needed.

**Improvements in Bus Transit Service**
Improvements in the quality of transit service can also increase transit use. Among the alternatives for improving bus service are adjusting routing,
Figure 12-1
Bus Transit Improvements

Legend
- Recommended Park-and-Ride
- Park-and-Ride
- Transit Center
- Recommended Transit Center
- Recommended Bus Line
- Existing Bus Line

Map of transportation improvements in various counties, including Recommended Park-and-Ride, Park-and-Ride, Transit Center, Recommended Transit Center, Recommended Bus Line, and Existing Bus Line.
extending operating times, and reducing headways. Specific recommendations for passenger amenities are beyond the scope of this plan, but modifications to increase transit security, comfort, and cleanliness should be considered for their impact on transit ridership.

A recent technique for increasing transit use is the addition of bike racks on buses. These normally mount on the front of the coach and carry up to two bicycles. In 2002, SORTA installed bike racks on all their coaches throughout their service area. TANK has not installed bike racks on their coaches at this time. The installation of bike racks on buses throughout the planning area offers the following benefits:

- Additional patrons can be attracted to transit who live or work beyond walking distance of bus stops, but within a short cycling distance.
- Combining bus travel with cycling extends the range for bicycle travel and, in the Cincinnati area, helps cyclists cope with barriers such as hills, viaducts and bridges.
- The combination of bikes and transit provides another alternative to driving alone and assists in improving air quality.

Transit applications of an Intelligent Transportation System, as described in Chapter 10, offer new potential for service improvements. For transit operators, the ability to identify and locate vehicles improves schedule adherence and can give riders real time information, reducing their wait time and improving transfer convenience.

It is recommended that the two largest transit systems in the region — SORTA and TANK — continue to evaluate available technology and its use to better meet the area’s transportation system needs through the following actions:

- Improve and expand web site and customer awareness regarding the site
- Investigate a system that will track and provide bus arrival/departure time and delay information in “real time”
- Investigate voice activated/language interpretation information system
- Consider installation of route/schedules/maps kiosks in key locations in the region
- Regularly re-evaluate security technology
- Investigate installation of fare-payment system that would allow use of charge cards, ATM, or Smart Cards
- Apply technology that would allow preemption of signal lights
- Implement enhanced AVL (vehicle location) technology
- Identify and evaluate alternative clean fuels
- Assess: need, costs, advantages, efficiencies of using Geographic Information System (GIS), Automated Vehicle Location (AVL) and Mobile Data Terminal (MDT) technologies
PRESERVATION OF RIGHT OF WAY
Within the 30-year planning period, additional rail transit (beyond the recommendations included in this plan) may become a viable solution to transportation challenges in the OKI region. To maintain the ability to implement rail transit in the future, it is recommended that rail transit right-of-way be preserved for portions of the region. Within the region are many miles of active and inactive rail right-of-ways recommended to be preserved for future community use. These linear parcels of land have significant potential use for various transit modes and other infrastructure. In addition, it is recommended that right-of-way be acquired for the potential implementation of rail transit in corridors where rail right-of-way does not exist.

It is recommended that SORTA maintain ownership of current parcels known as the Oasis Line and the Blue Ash Line.

Rail Transit right-of-way preservation and/or acquisition is recommended for the six corridors in the OKI region as shown in Figure 12-2. The specific rail corridors for right-of-way preservation include:

- I-71 (Blue Ash to 12th Street)
- I-75 (Xavier to Elmwood Place)
- I-75 (Elmwood Place to Union Centre)
- Eastern Corridor Wasson
- Southeastern
- I-71 (12th Street to Florence & CVG)

TRANSIT CENTERS AND PARK-AND-RIDE LOTS
Transit centers are facilities where transfers can be made between bus routes and/or rail transit lines or between different transit lines. Transit centers are located where several bus routes or transit lines converge. There can be a wide range of amenities associated with transit centers, from information desks and restrooms, to such services as day care centers, dry cleaners and other consumer needs. Among lines, schedules are synchronized to facilitate convenient transfers.

One multimodal transit center in the OKI region has been completed. The downtown Riverfront Transit Center, which opened in May 2003, is capable of handling conventional bus transit (both local and intercity) and light rail transit.

In downtown Cincinnati, development of a transit center is in the preliminary stages. In 2003, SORTA received $3.5 million in TRAC funding of the total $9.4 million required for the replacement of Government Square. The center will be transformed into a modern transit facility including five new bus bays, an eastbound bus passing lane and 15 new curbside bus stops on the south side of
Figure 12-2
Recommended Rail Transit Right-of-Way Preservation

Legend
Corridors for ROW Preservation
- I-71 (Blue Ash to 12th St)
- I-75 (Xavier to Elmwood Pl)
- I-75 (Elmwood Pl to Union Centre)
- Eastern Corridor Wasson
- Southeastern
- I-71 (12th St to Florence & CVG)
Fifth Street. The project will triple transit and passenger capacity of Government Square which serves over 20,000 passengers a day (Ohio's second largest passenger transit facility).

It is recommended that additional transit centers and park-and-ride lots be constructed as shown in Figure 12-1, including a transit center in downtown Newport in conjunction with riverfront redevelopments.

The estimated cost of each of the 23 recommended transit centers ranges from $0.5 million to $5 million, depending upon the amenities included at each site. In addition, the plan recommends that 12 park-and-ride lots be developed in the region through a combination of lease agreements and construction projects. The average cost to construct a park-and-ride is estimated to be $500,000 (see Figure 12-1).

These recommended transit centers should also be equipped with facilities for parking bicycles to encourage bicycle use and ease automobile parking requirements. These parking facilities should include bike lockers and covered bike racks suitable for securing the frame of the bike.

Streets accessing the transit centers should be improved to include bicycle lanes for increased road sharing safety and to encourage the use of bicycle access to transit.

**RAIL TRANSIT DEVELOPMENT**

A Regional Rail Plan was developed by SORTA with participation by OKI in June 2002. It contains several recommendations for rail transit in the region. From that plan, the *OKI 2030 Regional Transportation Plan* recommends the development of rail transit in the Eastern Corridor and the central riverfront area. Both are included in the financially constrained portion of this plan. The remaining recommendations remain as potential future projects; however, they are not included as part of the financially constrained portion of this plan. Instead, they are included in the Rail Transit Vision Plan discussed below.

**Eastern Corridor**

In the Eastern Corridor Study, rail is one component among a host of strategies recommended to improve mobility and connectivity in eastern Hamilton and western Clermont counties. The rail component of the Eastern Corridor Plan which makes use of right-of-way already owned by SORTA (Oasis line) would provide connectivity from the eastern suburbs to downtown Cincinnati (see Figure 12-3). The Eastern Corridor project, being advanced by the Hamilton County Transportation Improvement District (TID), is currently in the preliminary engineering/draft environmental impact statement (PE/DEIS) phase.
Figure 12-3
Potential Eastern Corridor Rail Alignment

Legend
- Potential Rail Alignment
Development of innovative funding strategies is underway and could serve as a regional model of how to fund major transit projects in the region. Estimated cost of the project is $410 million.

**Central Area Streetcar**
The Central Area Streetcar is recommended for the central riverfront. This represents a relatively inexpensive way to introduce rail transit to the area and link the riverfront cities of Cincinnati, Covington and Newport with high quality transit (see Figure 12-4). The Streetcar would travel at-grade within the existing right-of-way, mixing with other traffic. Estimated cost of the project is $132 million.

**RAIL TRANSIT VISION PLAN**
This plan supports the recommendations developed in the Regional Rail Plan, developed by SORTA with participation by OKI (see Figure 12-5). However, due to the requirement that this plan be financially constrained (that is, evidence of sufficient funds to cover the cost of the projects be demonstrated), OKI cannot recommend the full plan at this time. As described above, this plan does recommend rail streetcar in the central riverfront area and rail for the Eastern Corridor along the Oasis line; however, no other lines are recommended at this time because of the lack of funding.

Most of the alignments in the Regional Rail Plan have an end point in the Cincinnati Central Business District (CBD), which would be a hub for transferring from one rail transit line to another. If developed into a rail transit system, these alignments would link five counties and serve much of the region’s most densely developed and heavily traveled corridors.

The **I-71 Alignment**, Phase I, which was identified as the priority corridor in the *1993 OKI Long Range Plan*, has recently completed the Preliminary Engineering/Draft Environmental Impact phase. It extends between southwestern Warren County and the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport in Boone County. Light rail implementation for the I-71 Alignment would provide the foundation for transforming the region’s highway-dominated transportation system into a truly multimodal system. This line would provide a spine for connecting light rail segments, commuter rail lines, and bus routes. It would promote re-urbanization and new development which would, in turn, strengthen multimodal travel. The proposed light rail system along the I-71 alignment will be built in three phases by 2030 should “new” funds become available. Due to lack of local funding the project is not on the recommended list of projects for Federal Transit Administration New Starts.
Figure 12-4
Central Area Streetcar

Legend
Streetcar Route
The **Wasson Alignment** provides a connection between the I-71 and Eastern Alignment. This plan is consistent with the recommendations from the study to preserve the right-of-way along the existing rail line between the Xavier area and Fairfax, including the line along Wasson Avenue for future tie-in to the I-71 LRT.
The **Southeastern Alignment** connects the Cincinnati CBD with Northern Kentucky University, possibly crossing the Ohio River via the L&N Bridge, for which the rail right-of-way is currently available.

The **I-75 Alignment**, which parallels I-75 for much of its length, extends from Cincinnati north to I-275 then to the West Chester/Union Centre Boulevard area. The North/South Transportation Initiative, completed in 2003, recognizes the value of a light rail facility and recommends preserving right-of-way for light rail in the corridor.

The **Western Alignment**, which would connect Cheviot and Cincinnati, uses abandoned CSX Transportation right-of-way for almost its entire length. Although many of the parcels of right-of-way have been purchased in a piecemeal fashion for private development, it still may be possible for the line to be built since much of the alignment would be on aerial structures.

In the course of developing rail transit, bus transit would need to be modified as a supporting and integrated system. Bus routes would be designed to support rail transit. Feeder buses would operate on short length route segments to convey passengers using rail transit. Express buses would be limited to routes that do not compete with rail transit.

The feasibility of developing rail transit must be determined through major investment studies. Each travel corridor varies in terms of traffic patterns, existing transportation facilities, land use, topographic constraints, and development trends.