CHAPTER 3

TRANSIT

Transit is increasingly important as a means to reduce congestion, improve air quality, and insure mobility for all population groups. The transit improvements recommended for Kenton County include bus service expansion and recommendations from other planning initiatives to extend light rail through Kenton County as part of a regional rail system and to link the Covington, Newport, and Cincinnati downtowns by streetcar.

THE GROWING ROLE OF TRANSIT

Transit is becoming increasingly important in urban areas. It has always been valued by individuals who cannot or prefer not to drive, but now transit is being promoted for its role in addressing transportation problems in urban areas. Transit has become an integral part of strategies to reduce congestion, improve air quality, and move people from welfare into the economic and social mainstream (see Chapter 1).

Among its benefits to Kenton County, transit is especially critical for its role in addressing air quality problems. Northern Kentucky was out of compliance with air quality standards until July of 2002, when its designation for ozone was upgraded from “non-attainment” to “attainment.” In 2004, the area will again be classified as “non-attainment” and face renewed requirements for reducing vehicle emissions as more stringent air quality standards go into effect.

For “non-attainment” areas, the state sets “allowable levels” of vehicle emissions tied to air quality standards. Compliance is determined through a “conformity test” that compares the area’s vehicle emissions (calculated through modeling during the development of the regional long-range transportation plan) with the area’s “allowable levels.” Areas that fail the conformity test stand to lose federal funds for transportation improvements. In 2001, Northern Kentucky passed the “conformity test” by only a narrow margin, and passage will be even more difficult in the future. Increases in transit ridership can be critical for lowering emission levels as the ozone standards become more stringent.

For transit to evolve into a viable travel option – and the current transportation system to become truly multi-modal – improvements must be made incrementally in a long-term process. Improvements include the gradual addition of more park-and-ride lots, bike and pedestrian connectors to transit stops, shuttle services, and higher density in developed areas. As transit becomes a more feasible option for connecting people with jobs and services, it will attract more riders and help reduce congestion.
Kenton County is at a critical point for determining the role of transit in its future. At a minimum, the county has the opportunity to expand bus service. In addition, voters may be asked to make a decision on rail transit, as discussed later in this chapter. An additional alternative is Bus Rapid Transit, a long-term proposition for which the outcome depends on steps taken now, as discussed in the next chapter.

**CURRENT TRANSIT SERVICE**

Kenton County’s major transit service is the fixed-route bus service provided by the Transit Authority of Northern Kentucky (TANK). Additional transit service is provided by TANK’s special bus services and by other transit providers.

TANK provides Kenton County with bus service as part of a multi-county operation that includes Boone and Campbell Counties and an extension into the Cincinnati Central Business District. This extension enables TANK riders to transfer to the bus system in Hamilton County (the Metro bus system, which is operated by the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority, or SORTA). TANK’s bus routes are shown in Figure 3-1.

An increasingly important aspect of transit service is the use of advanced technologies for transit management and operation. These technologies enable improvements in speed, reliability, security, and other features that make transit more attractive. TANK’s use of advanced technologies is summarized in Chapter 8.

**Fixed Route Bus Service**

TANK operates fixed route bus service on both a daily and express basis (operates during peak hours on weekdays). The fixed route service is provided on 33 regular routes, of which 22 are in Kenton County, and employs 90 full-sized coaches, all of them lift-equipped. In 2001, TANK’s annual ridership was nearly 4.4 million, which is a nearly 20% increase over a five-year period. Fares are currently $1.00 for adults, 50 cents for students, and 35 cents for senior citizens and people with disabilities.

Fixed route service in Kenton County is provided in the northern, most developed area and also south of I-275 along three major north-south routes: Turkeyfoot (KY-1303) almost to KY-536, and KY-17 and KY-16 to their junction south of KY-536.

TANK has expanded bus service by adding a transit center in downtown Covington that functions as a transfer and hub facility for nearly all of TANK’s routes, and by adding park-and-ride lots. Six of TANK’s 20 park-and-ride lots are in Kenton County (see Table 3-1), and three of these have over 95% occupancy on a daily basis. Another eight “unofficial” park-and-ride lots in Kenton County are at public facilities such as shopping centers and churches.
Figure 3-1. Recommended Bus System
### Table 3-1. Park-and-Ride Lots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Parking Spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buttermilk Crossing</td>
<td>Crescent Springs</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covington Transit Center</td>
<td>Covington</td>
<td>1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jillian's</td>
<td>Covington</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lookout Heights</td>
<td>Fort Wright</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TANK Headquarters</td>
<td>Fort Wright</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Special Bus Services**

In addition to fixed route service, TANK operates the following special services.

- The **Southbank Shuttle** is a loop operation with two fixed routes that serve the riverfront area in Covington, Newport, and Cincinnati. The operation uses 14 shuttle buses to provide service between hotels and major attractions in the Covington and Cincinnati entertainment districts and the Newport Aquarium and Levee. Coaches are handicapped-accessible and operate on a daily basis at 15 minute intervals (Monday-Thursday from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday from 6 a.m. to midnight, Saturday from 10 a.m. to midnight, and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.). Fares are 50 cents.

- The **DayTripper** provides door-to-door service in parts of Kenton County without fixed route bus service. With six vans, this service delivers passengers to the nearest bus stop for fixed route service or directly to destinations where fixed route service is not available. Trips are required to be scheduled in advance. The DayTripper operates daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fares are the same as for fixed-route service.

- Under the Regional Area Mobility Program, **RAMP Service** provides door-to-door service and assistance in boarding and exiting for people with disabilities. Service is provided to downtown Cincinnati for transfers to similar service provided by Metro (known as Access). RAMP uses lift-equipped paratransit minibuses. For the entire TANK service area, RAMP has 16 vehicles that serve about 185 people per day. Service eligibility is determined by TANK and can be scheduled for weekdays between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. at a fare of $1.00 per trip (trips involving Metro require fares to be paid to both systems).

- **Event Service** is available for the Cincinnati Reds and Cincinnati Bengal home games, the annual Riverfest event, and the Tall Stacks and other major festivals. For baseball and football home games, TANK has a fixed route service (one-way fares are $3.00 for adults and $1.00 for children) and also an option to reserve a coach for up to 38 people for transport between one location and the stadium ($250 round-trip).
Other Transit Services

In addition to TANK’s different bus services, transit is available to Kenton County from other providers that include private taxicabs, the Greyhound Bus Lines and Amtrak rail passenger service accessed from stations in Cincinnati (rail service is offered via “the Cardinal” between Washington, D.C. and Chicago), and carpools and vanpools, which are both forms of rideshare.

Carpools and vanpools, which both rely on voluntary arrangements for commuting, are promoted and supported through OKI’s RideShare program. Carpools generally involve from two to five people sharing a ride in their personal cars. Vanpools generally involve from nine to fifteen commuters sharing a van for commuting. OKI markets rideshare through meetings with employers and a variety of promotional materials, operates a computerized carpool matching service for individuals, and offers a mapping program for employers that displays the locations of potential rideshare participants. OKI’s RideShare program also includes a guaranteed ride home program, assistance with establishing park-and-ride lots, and other programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS: BUS TRANSIT

TANK is committed to expanding and improving bus service in an effort to attract more riders. Expansion will involve adding more routes, more coaches, and new facilities that make service more convenient, such as park-and-ride lots, covered transit stops, and bike racks at bus stops. Improvements in management and operation involve the continuing application of new technologies, coordination with other transit operators, and other efforts to improve service frequency, reliability, and security. TANK has been aggressive in its efforts to expand transit ridership, and this approach is expected to continue.

The recommendations for expanding TANK’s service in Kenton County, which are consistent with TANK’s plans, involve adding three additional routes and one park-and-ride lot, as presented in Table 3-2 and Figure 3-1.

Table 3-2. Recommended Improvements for Bus Transit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Bus Routes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I-275</td>
<td>Between I-75 (connect with existing route that extends west into Boone County to KY-237) and Campbell County (to I-471)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KY-536</td>
<td>Between Boone County (to U.S. 42) and Campbell County (to U.S. 27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th Street</td>
<td>Between I-75 and Campbell County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Park-and-Ride Lot</td>
<td>(for 100 vehicles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KY-17/Madison Pike</td>
<td>Near junction with Madison Pike (Old KY-17) north of Hands Pike</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All three of the recommended routes are for east-west travel. In addition to improving opportunity for east-west travel by transit, these routes will bring a new level of connectivity that will expand opportunities for north-south transit travel and improve transit’s overall viability as a travel alternative. Transit will also be improved by implementation of the recommended park-and-ride lot.

Kenton County’s share of TANK’s estimated capital cost through 2030, including recommended improvements for the Northern Kentucky service area, is estimated to be $45.5 million. This plan’s financial analysis indicates that funds should be available to expand and maintain bus transit as recommended (see Chapter 9).

**RAIL TRANSIT INITIATIVES**

As part of the metropolitan area, Kenton County has been subject to several planning initiatives for rail transit. Kenton County is addressed by The Regional Rail Plan that was adopted by OKI’s Board in 2002, and also by two other planning initiatives from which recommendations were carried forward and integrated into The Regional Rail Plan: The I-71 Corridor Study that recommended light rail, and The Central Area Loop Study that supported recommendations for streetcar.

Light rail and streetcar are different forms of transit but use similar technologies. Light rail is the most widely recommended rail technology for this metropolitan area. In a light rail system, the vehicles operate on tracks as individual or multiple units, powered by overhead electricity. The rail lines can be constructed along major highways or in existing rail corridors, or they can be built so that light rail blends into traffic on city streets. In urban areas where light rail has already been implemented, this technology has been successful and widely accepted.

Streetcar is similar to light rail in that it uses rail track and is powered by overhead wires, but the cars are typically half the size, carry fewer passengers, and operate at lower speeds. A streetcar system, in contrast with light rail, is used almost exclusively for short trips.

**The Regional Rail Plan**

The Regional Rail Plan is the rail component of a larger plan called MetroMoves. The MetroMoves plan presents recommendations for developing a regional transit system over the next thirty years. It presents an expanded bus transit system for Hamilton County, Ohio, and a regional rail system. The rail system would extend into every county in the metropolitan area, with a major hub in the Cincinnati Central Business District that would connect rail lines and bus service. MetroMoves and its rail plan component were both developed by Metro in coordination with OKI and TANK.

The Regional Rail Plan accounts for other recent rail transit planning initiatives by including or modifying their recommendations and also adds some new recommendations. The rail system, as shown in Figure 3-2, would include light rail
and streetcar lines, as well as “commuter rail” lines (commuter rail uses diesel-powered vehicles that operate on freight tracks).

The rail lines would be connected to bus and shuttle services at transit hubs, thus enabling passengers to transfer to destinations throughout the region. The Regional Rail Plan presents conceptual alignments, ridership forecasts, and costs for the recommended lines and operational concepts and benefit calculations for the system overall.

In The Regional Rail Plan, Kenton County would be integrated into a transit system that would serve much of the region’s densely developed area and its most heavily traveled corridors. It would be included in the regional progression toward a multi-modal transportation system and share in the expected benefits involving re-urbanization and new development.

The light rail system’s implementation will depend on each county generating its own funding, which would in turn provide eligibility for federal and state funding. The first step in this process was a ballot initiative for a half-cent sales tax to provide local funding in Hamilton County, which was turned down by voters in November 2002. The next step has not yet been determined, but the system’s implementation regionwide depends on its initial implementation in Hamilton County.

**The I-71 Corridor Study**

A “major investment study” (MIS) was conducted for the I-71 Corridor (I-71 Corridor Transportation Study) by OKI between 1995 and 1998 in response to recommendations in OKI’s regional long-range transportation plan of 1993 (Managing Mobility: Year 2010 Transportation Plan), which was the first plan to recommend a rail transit network for the metropolitan area. The outcome of the MIS was a recommendation for light rail from southern Warren County in Ohio, through Hamilton County into Covington, and then southwest along I-71/I-75 into Boone County with two end-points, one at the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport and one in the Florence Mall area, as shown in Figure 3-2.

For the recommended I-71 light rail line, a priority segment was identified between 12th Street in Covington and the City of Blue Ash, north of Cincinnati. This “starter segment” includes 19 miles of the recommended line’s 44 miles. OKI completed a Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Impact Study (PE/EIS) for the priority segment in November 2001. The study refined locations for rail alignment and stations, cost data, and information on impacts and benefits.

The recommendations from the MIS and the PE/EIS for the I-71 Corridor were integrated into The Regional Rail Plan, including recommendations for the light rail alignment in Kenton County as presented later in this chapter.
The Central Area Loop Study

The Central Area Loop Study was begun in 1999 and completed in the fall of 2001 and adopted by OKI’s Board. The study was commissioned by OKI and directed by a committee that included representatives from the cities of Covington, Newport, and Cincinnati and from transit operating agencies, transportation agencies, and the private and public sectors.

The scope of the study included three distinct elements: analysis of a loop circulator system between Cincinnati, Covington, and Newport and the evaluation of a preferred technology; an evaluation of traffic congestion on 4th and 5th Streets in Newport and Covington (see Chapter 5); and consideration of the feasibility of constructing a light rail line to Newport from the I-71 Corridor light rail line.

The analysis of the loop circulator and study of alternative technologies resulted in the selection of the Southbank Shuttle as the preferred alternative. The technology of “Personal Rapid Transit” (PRT, which uses small, fully automated vehicles on an elevated guideway) was “not recommended,” but the development of additional information on design, feasibility, and cost was encouraged. In addition, The Central Area Loop Study recommended route modifications for the Southbank Shuttle and recommended study of streetcar in the future for serving city downtown resident and workday populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS: LIGHT RAIL AND STREETCAR

This plan’s recommendations for rail transit in Kenton County are consistent with The Regional Rail Plan, which in turn are consistent with recommendations made in the I-71 Corridor Study and PE/EIS Study and the Central Area Loop Study.

Light rail is recommended for implementation in Kenton County in two phases:
• north from 12th Street in Covington to downtown Cincinnati, which would involve crossing the Ohio River on a new bridge, and
• west from 12th Street in Covington to the Boone County line, and then extending to Florence and the airport.

The recommended light rail alignment for Kenton County is shown in Figure 3-2. The capital cost is estimated to be $97 million for the first phase from Cincinnati to 12th Street and $303 million for the second phase from 12th Street to Boone County. Implementation of the first phase is recommended for completion by 2008. Implementation of the second phase is recommended for completion by 2020.

In addition to the recommendation for light rail, streetcar is recommended, consistent with the Regional Rail Plan, for linking the Covington, Newport, and Cincinnati downtowns. This streetcar route, as shown in Figure 3-2, would replace the
Southbank Shuttle. The capital cost of the streetcar system in Kenton County is estimated to be $24 million, which would cover 1.5 miles of track from the south end of the bridge over the Ohio River to the center of the Bridge over the Licking River. Implementation is recommended for completion in 2010.

Implementation of both the light rail and streetcar recommendations for Kenton County depend first on commitments for implementation in Hamilton County and then on local funding availability. A local funding commitment is a prerequisite for federal funding. The ballot initiative that was proposed in Hamilton County called for 25% local funding, but a funding strategy has not been developed for Northern Kentucky and is not likely to be developed unless funding is first committed in Hamilton County.