

Linking bus systems becoming priority for planners

Rail is most alluring but more coordination among rural systems is key for transit

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Most advocates of public transit can't wait for shiny trains to start whisking commuters to and from work and cultural attractions.

But before the launch of a northeast rail route, perhaps a decade from now, lots of less-lustrous things have to happen.

Like how do you improve rubber-tired public transportation within the suburbs and from suburbs to Marion County's bus transit operator, IndyGo?

IndyGo and its modest suburban and rural counterparts, many of which use vans and small buses, will also be needed down the road to work in tandem with a future commuter rail system.

The Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority, which is the implementing agency for eventual commuter trains, recently accepted a report that recommends ways to improve coordination between existing transit providers.

Rather than just toss the report on the shelf, like countless other mass-transit exercises in the last 30 years, CIRTA has hired a liaison to help transit agencies turn recommendations into reality.

"I will be a fixture at meetings," said Christina Campoll, who will serve in the newly created post as liaison. Besides attending regular meetings of regional transit systems, she plans to bring them together in joint discussions on a regular basis to improve coordination.

"That's a big step forward," said Ehren Bingaman, executive director of CIRTA.

He said the goals also dovetail with the work of Indy Connect, a regional initiative to improve general transportation options, including those for commuters.

"We know we have regional employers who are looking for ways to improve workforce mobility," Bingaman said.

But cross-county bus transit in the metro area is challenged.

Many of the modest systems in surrounding counties are geared toward the elderly and the disabled and sprang out of social agencies serving that clientele.

A recently completed report by Dayton-

based RLS & Associates noted that transit operators often have inadequate operating funds to support regional and cross-county trips.

These systems also find it difficult to transfer passengers in large numbers to other operators. There's also little public information about the availability of regional and cross-county public transportation in rural areas.

Nevertheless, the operators have learned to be innovative despite their nominal budgets. For example, Hamilton County Express, operated by Noblesville-based Janus

Developmental Services, has picked up passengers from not-for-profit LifeStream Services in Yorktown and taken them to a location along 96th Street to board IndyGo's Open Door service into Marion County.

Most other services, such as Access Johnson County and Boone Area Transit, also conduct handoffs to other operators, although often it's informal.

Bingaman and Campoll would like to see some routes formalized and thus more predictable. That could draw new riders, such as commuting employees, to help support the transit systems.

Bingaman said the idea is not to disrupt the distinct mission of rural transit providers. "We want to work together, but we don't want them to give up their client-focused services," he said.

Rather, they might be able to work together to establish transit centers in some areas—perhaps nothing more than a shelter where passengers connecting from one transit system to another can wait.

RLS also recommends expanding so-called express routes that connect IndyGo routes with those of other systems in outlying counties. It recommends considering the use of a transit pass recognized by various transit providers, to simplify the handoff.

Better bus service

A consultant has suggested ways to improve bus service inside and between the doughnut counties and to improve links with bus service in Marion County:

- **Increase "express bus" service.** Outlying systems would expand bus links to IndyGo fixed routes.
- **Create transit pass.** Would be honored by multiple bus systems that connect with each other.
- **Add public transit centers.** Could be as simple as shelters in places where buses meet to transfer passengers.
- **Add park-and-ride lots.** Would promote opportunities for ride sharing in rural areas where public transportation isn't available.
- **Add circulator routes.** Would provide last-mile connection to employment sites. Could involve use of employer-sponsored shuttles.

Sources: RLS & Associates, Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority