



Transportation Policy Institute
Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center
Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

COMMUNITY TRANSPORTATION PLANNING IN ESSEX COUNTY: A SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

July 3, 2001

Prepared for: New Jersey Institute for Social Justice
60 Park Place – Suite 511
Newark, New Jersey 07102

Prepared by: Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center
Transportation Policy Institute
Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning & Public Policy
Rutgers – The State University of New Jersey
33 Livingston Avenue – 5th Floor
New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. The Act was designed to overhaul federal welfare programs by shifting the emphasis from welfare support services and aid to work responsibility. It set lifetime benefit limits and required that welfare recipients either find work or participate in work related activities such as job training and vocational education (TCRP, 2000). To implement these federal welfare reform mandates, in March of 1997, New Jersey adopted the WorkFirst New Jersey (WFNJ) initiative.

Welfare reform both nationally and in New Jersey has raised numerous public policy questions and has highlighted a range personal and institutional barriers that make the transition to work difficult for welfare dependent individuals. One significant barrier is the lack of adequate transportation services allowing transit dependent populations access to jobs, services, goods, health care and recreation in an increasingly dispersed and suburbanized landscape. This problem is often referred to as the spatial mismatch.

In New Jersey, the challenges of the spatial mismatch problem are acute. Approximately two-thirds of New Jersey's existing population and job opportunities are located in suburban counties. In 1995, less than half of all private employment opportunities in Essex County were located in the City of Newark. Newark lost nearly 16,000 jobs between 1980 and 1995. This reflects national and statewide trends toward the continued decentralization of jobs to suburban communities.

Accessing jobs in suburban locations is exceedingly difficult for Newark residents. More than forty-four percent (44.3%) of Newark households are zero-vehicle households – the leading indicator of transit dependency in the United States. In addition, Essex County has the largest TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) and GA (General Assistance) programs in the State and the programs are disproportionately large. Essex County represents only 10% of statewide population, while it has 26% of the state TANF recipients and 30% of state GA participants. While Essex County has an extensive transportation network, including 46 fixed route bus and light rail services, two commuter rail lines, private carrier routes providing service to New York City, as well as demand responsive and ridesharing services, there are significant unmet transportation needs related to transit dependent populations.

In preparation for implementing the WFNJ initiative, the state embarked upon a multi-agency, statewide project designed to develop county-based community transportation plans for all twenty-one of New Jersey's counties. This effort began in July 1997 and was completed in October 1998. It is recognized as a national model of proactive multi-jurisdictional planning. The planning process was intended to profile transit dependent populations, examine the residency characteristics of WorkFirst New Jersey participants, examine the location of employment opportunities, document the public and private transportation services available in each county, identify transportation service gaps, estimate demand for transportation services; investigate and develop alternatives for enhancing transportation services and service delivery systems; and prepare a final plan for the selected alternatives.

The Essex County Community Transportation Plan was completed in October 1998. Subsequently, the County was awarded several million dollars in formula and block grant funds to implement several of the plan recommendations. Unfortunately, as we enter the second quarter of 2001, more than two and a half years after the plan was completed, little progress has been made in implementing the improvements outlined in the plan.

Recognizing that transportation is a key linkage between city residents and economic opportunity, in January of 2001, the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice hired the Transportation Policy Institute(TPI) at Rutgers University to conduct a situational analysis of community transportation planning efforts in

Essex County, New Jersey. The scope of the study was focused primarily on employment-related transportation issues and the actions that have been taken to meet the transportation needs of WorkFirst NJ clients and the working poor in Essex County. The following is a summary of the key findings and conclusions from this investigation.

KEY FINDINGS

- Essex County lags behind other NJ counties in terms of community transportation planning, process and implementation.
- Essex County is split between the service areas of three transportation management associations (TMAs), which, in some regions of New Jersey have played a pivotal role in the community transportation planning process. Major employment destinations are served these three TMAs and by New Jersey Transit in an uncoordinated fashion.
- Neither the Essex County nor the City of Newark Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) have a standing committee on transportation. Consequently, it appears that transportation concerns are seldom, if ever, considered in the critical context of WIB activities.
- The City of Newark clearly recognizes the importance of community transportation needs and services; however, while there is evidence that the Mayor's Office on Employment and Training has in the past and will continue to work with specific employers and city workers on an ad-hoc basis, there is no clear policy initiative aimed at addressing these issues in a comprehensive way.
- In calendar year 2000, Essex County received \$2,175,168 in TANF block grant formula funds. This represents 25% of the \$8,778,599 TANF transportation funds available statewide. **The County forfeited these funds due to non-performance.** Using the estimated costs of the new feeder services proposed for the JARC grants as a guide, in concept, this funding could have been used to support at least four new employment-related transportation services.
- The County received a similar allocation of TANF transportation funds for CY2001. Staff plans to use the funds to launch two new transportation initiatives: 1) a shuttle service to transport social service clients between service agency locations in the County, and 2) a program designed to foster automobile ownership by soliciting and accepting the donation of vehicles and the distribution of donated vehicles to the TANF and post-TANF eligible clients. It is noteworthy that neither initiative was part of the 1998 Essex Community Transportation Plan.
- The scope of federal funding resources available for community transportation services is significant. A 1996 study conducted by the Community Transportation Association of America identified "90 programs across 11 Federal departments and six independent Federal agencies that can be used to support community transportation efforts in planning, capital purchase and operating services." Many of the identified programs are not traditionally thought of as programs that support transportation initiatives. In New Jersey, a diverse mix of state, county and local funding options add to the list of resources that could be tapped to support community transportation initiatives. It is important to note that some researchers have asserted that creative leveraging of existing resources and a concerted effort to address redundancies and inefficiencies inherent in our current system of providing transportation services could yield significant improvements in the level of service provided to transit-dependent populations, without requiring significant increases in the total funding available.

CONCLUSIONS

Our conclusions regarding the community transportation planning experience in Essex County are organized around the five characteristics recognized in the Transit Cooperative Research Program publication, Guidebook for Developing Welfare-to-Work Transportation Services (TCRP, 2000), as the necessary components of a successful welfare-to-work transportation project or program. The characteristics are: collaboration, leadership, communication, creativity and sustainability. In a very real sense, these characteristics come together to create a “recipe for success” that can be used to evaluate the community transportation planning and implementation efforts undertaken in Essex County.

Collaboration

One significant ingredient for a successful planning and implementation program is a high level of collaboration and coordination between human service providers, transportation providers and other organizations at the state, regional and local levels. The guidebook notes that successful programs are characterized by agencies and groups “joining forces...to translate their agency-specific experience into cooperative efforts.” In addition the involvement of faith-based, community and grass-roots organizations was an important factor in ensuring program success. Finally, the report suggests that “building in coordination from the top” can help to “narrow” the distance between agencies and organizations not accustomed to dealing with one another.

The lack of involvement by community-based and faith-based organizations providing social services and transportation services in Essex County is a critical deficiency in the Essex County process. While not a comprehensive inventory, a survey of groups providing transportation services conducted as part of the 1997/98 planning process revealed that at least 27 nongovernmental organizations provide demand-responsive transportation services in Essex County. Given the depth and breadth of the groups operating in the greater Newark region, it is likely that these groups could significantly enhance the process with knowledge, energy and leadership.

While the planning process in Essex was initiated with coordination from the top, the collaboration and coordination ended when the County Community Transportation Plan was completed in October of 1998. At that time, control and “ownership” of the plan and process was intended to transfer from the state to the county. This transition never occurred, and in fact, the project steering committee formed to facilitate on-going collaboration has not met since the plan was completed. While a recent effort has been made to reconvene the steering committee, this action seems to be solely in response to a state required two-year plan update cycle. Essex County and the City of Newark demonstrate little ownership in the plan and are not significantly focused on its implementation. The foundation of ongoing collaboration put in place as part of the state-initiated planning process was never seized upon by the county or any other participant in the planning process and has never been built upon.

Leadership

The second and perhaps most critical element of successful community transportation programs in New Jersey and nationwide is leadership. The TCRP Guidebook highlights the importance of leadership and notes that “the committed leadership of an individual or organization can help to carry a project from planning to implementation.” The Guidebook further suggests that “a strong leader can motivate diverse stakeholders and ensure that their differences enrich the planning process.”

In Essex County, there is a significant leadership gap with regard to community transportation planning. As noted in our findings, both public and non-profit leadership is seriously lacking. From the public perspective, the provision of community transportation services is not a high priority. This appears to be true for several reasons. First, Essex County has made a policy decision to focus planning efforts to

address spatial mismatch issues with economic development and housing location strategies, rather than the provision of direct transportation services. Second, the sheer scope of social service needs in Essex County is so significant that other needs such as child care, employment training and health care are given precedence by both Essex County and the City of Newark. In part, this approach is facilitated by the extensive nature of the public transportation system in Essex County. While not ideal, it is theoretically possible to reach a substantial number of employment destinations via traditional public transit services. Unfortunately, as noted in the County Community Transportation plan, significant gaps in traditional services do exist and should be addressed.

For many of the same reasons, nongovernmental leadership is similarly lacking in Essex County. Simply put, Essex County lacks a transportation champion. In other regions of New Jersey, this role has sometimes been filled by transportation management associations (TMAs). Essex County is unique in that the county is split between the service area of three separate TMAs. Two of the TMAs have their primary focus on a larger area outside of Essex County. The other TMA which is charged with servicing both Essex and Union County is operated by an individual within NJ Transit. This dilution of focus appears to have created a situation where there is no singular voice keeping transportation issues and needs on the public policy agenda and uniquely focused on addressing the transportation issues facing Essex County.

Communication

A third important element of successful community transportation planning is open and continuous communication throughout the planning and implementation process. The TCRP Guidebook advises not to “underestimate the importance of maintaining communication among program staff, participants and stakeholders.” The leadership gap and lack of collaboration referenced above have resulted in an almost complete breakdown of communication between the parties involved in the community transportation planning process after the plan was completed in 1998. In addition, there appears to be no communication between the County and the City of Newark or other transportation providers operating in the greater Newark region.

Creativity

Another characteristic of successful employment related community transportation initiatives is creativity. The TCRP Guidebook notes that traditional transportation services do not easily meet the transportation needs of welfare recipients. As such, innovative responses are required. The report observes that a common trait of many successful programs is that planners were “thinking out of the box.”

The statewide community transportation planning process, through which the Essex County plan was developed, is recognized in the Guidebook as an example of creative collaboration. This creative context resulted in a number of innovative approaches to dealing with welfare-related transportation issues in New Jersey. In fact, the recommended options for addressing unmet transportation needs presented in the Essex County plan were typical of many of the responses to filling transportation service gaps presented in the TCRP Guidebook as examples of best practices.

Two models highlighted in the Guidebook that were not included among the recommended options presented in the Essex County plan are creative partnering with non-traditional agencies and organizations and coordinating transportation services through the use of a “mobility brokerage.” Both concepts seem particularly well-suited to the Essex County context. First, as previously noted, Essex has a well-developed network of community and faith-based organizations that have strong connections with

the targeted population. This network could provide fertile ground for forging new partnerships. It does not appear that this opportunity was fully explored as part of the 1998 planning process.

In addition, our interviews revealed at least one example of an untapped opportunity to forge a new public-private partnership to fund and operate new transportation services. This example involves UPS which operates a worksite in Secaucus. UPS has expressed a willingness to fund an employee shuttle service, but they are not willing to take on the liability of operating the service. To date, the City of Newark has been unable to broker a partnership with NJ Transit to operate the service. UPS has initiated similar shuttles in other jurisdictions. Opportunities such as this one have not been fully explored and utilized in Essex.

The second model with potential for application in Essex County is the creation of a “mobility brokerage” whose purpose is to promote better coordination and integration of transportation services offered by a range of traditional and non-traditional service providers.. There is a growing body of national research documenting the flexibility of transportation services funded by a wide variety of federal funding programs. The prevailing operating assumption by many, including Essex County staff and many transportation service providers, is that most federal and state transportation funding programs offer little flexibility in how funds are used and who can be served. Greater education is needed regarding the flexibility of funding programs to facilitate and encourage a more integrated system of delivering community transportation services that maximizes limited resources and eliminates the duplication of services and administration.

Sustainability

The TCRP Guidebook suggests that the fifth and final characteristic of a successful community transportation initiative is sustainability, noting that “successful programs have incorporated strategies to ensure that results can be sustained over time for targeted clients and in some cases the general public.” Integral to meeting this sustainability goal is comprehensive service planning, that includes a focus on the long term. This is especially important for services funded via seed money such as Job Access & Reverse Commute grants. As previously described, the *Transportation Services Alternatives and Options* section of the Essex County plan presents seven recommended options for meeting unmet transportation needs in the County. The options are described in general terms and implementation issues are outlined; however, the plan clearly notes that “more detailed planning and analysis is needed to implement the options.” This planning has not occurred, yet the County is moving forward with the implementation of three of the recommended services. This failure to follow through with more detailed planning prior to implementation could seriously compromise the sustainability of these services beyond the funding provided by the JARC grants.

In summary, a great deal of work must be done to realize the potential of community transportation initiatives in Essex County. Notwithstanding the challenges presented in this report, we believe that significant opportunities exist to improve the level of transportation service available to county residents. We also believe that NJISJ could play an important dual role as catalyst and watchdog in the community transportation planning process. Based on our investigation, there is a clearly evident leadership gap that needs to be filled. The challenge will be for NJISJ to decide what level of commitment it is inclined to dedicate toward future actions in this regard.