Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives
Highways and Transit Subcommittee

Connecting Communities: The Role of the Surface Transportation Network in Moving People and Freight

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There are significant changes occurring in our world that are reflected in the choices people make regarding transportation. Skyrocketing fuel prices, continued increases in traffic congestion, and concerns regarding global warming and peak oil have merged with transit's primary role of providing access to jobs and schools, all of which have resulted in substantial increases in the use of public transportation. At the same time, it is clear that historic underinvestment in our nation's transportation system has created a backlog of needs that must be addressed to sustain the economic competitiveness of our regions, states and the country as a whole. The reauthorization of the Surface Transportation Bill in 2009 provides an opportunity to increase our investment in our transportation systems and to alter our spending priorities in a manner that reflects the changing environment.

While public transportation has always played a critical role in meeting the transportation needs of our major metropolitan areas, it now also plays a very significant role in our small and medium-sized cities as well. Lane Transit District (LTD) serves about 260,000 people in Eugene and Springfield, Oregon, and surrounding smaller cities. Eugene-Springfield is a growing community located approximately 100 miles south of Portland and straddling Interstate 5. LTD plays a crucial role in the community's transportation network, as evidenced by ridership that exceeds 11 million boardings per year.

Like all transit systems, LTD provides transportation for those people who, for any number of reasons, do not have other transportation options. LTD's services enable these residents to access jobs, schools, and medical and social activities. Without the mobility provided by transit, these citizens would have limited opportunities to contribute to the community and experience life.

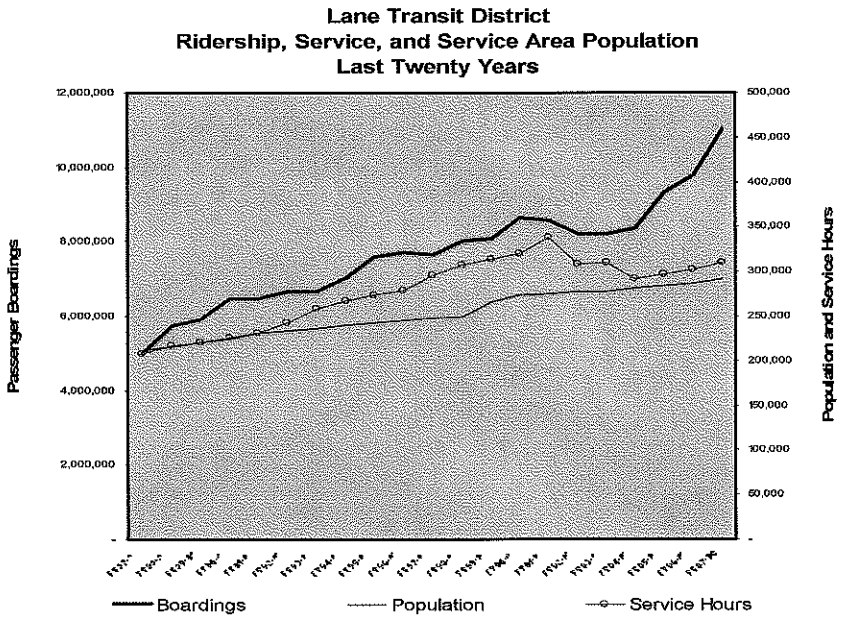
In addition, LTD has, over the years, become a more and more attractive option for people who would otherwise drive. Currently, approximately 47 percent of LTD's boardings are by "choice" riders, defined as those who would have had a car available for the trip. Another 16 percent of riders had shared access to a vehicle. Eliminating these car trips reduces traffic congestion, gas consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions.

Federal investment has played a decisive role in the development of LTD's system. Federal funds have been used for all bus purchases, for all major transit stations and other facilities, and for the development of EmX, LTD's bus rapid transit system. LTD's

system would be a mere shadow of what it is today without federal funding support. Continued federal support for public transportation is absolutely critical in allowing LTD to realize its potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Eugene-Springfield area's transportation system.

Ridership Exploding

LTD's ridership has increased dramatically. As noted on the table below, transit boardings on LTD buses have increased 34 percent over the last three years and 17 percent just during the past year. This far exceeds the growth in the community's population. Growth in ridership has also far outstripped the District's ability to increase service.



A Successful Formula for Transit

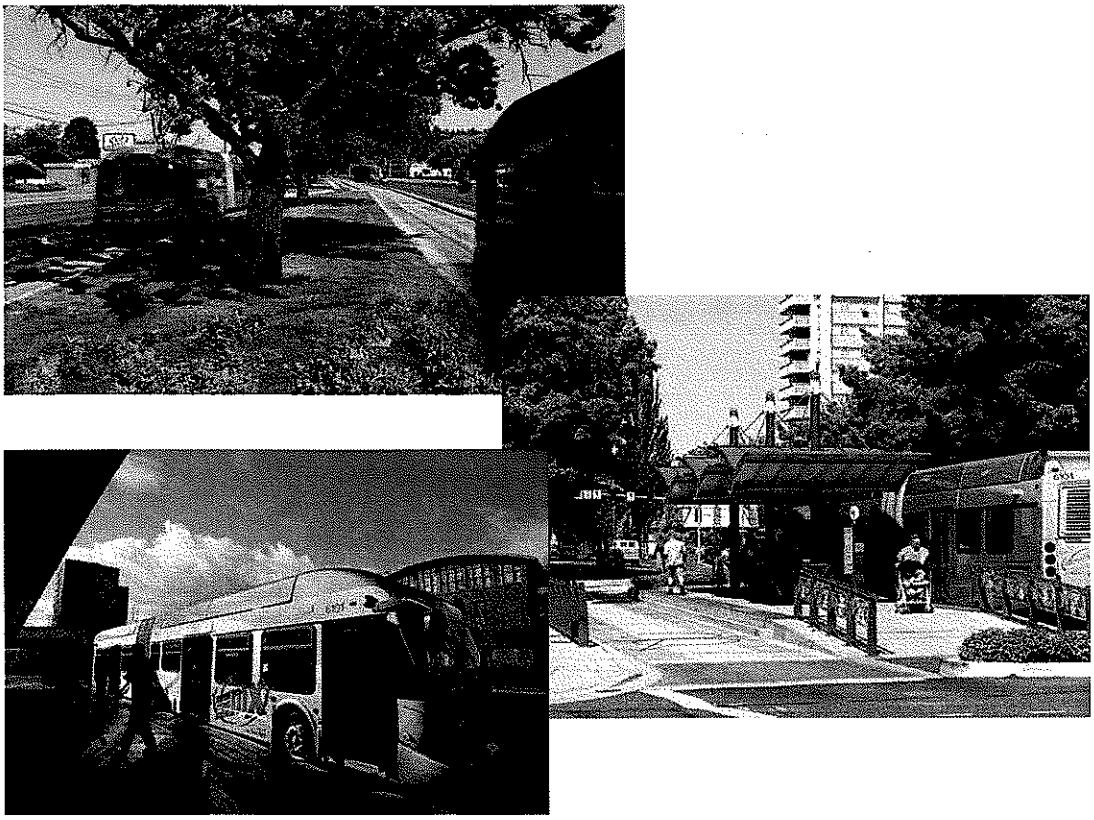
LTD is consistently rated as a high-performing transit system, with very high ridership and productivity compared to other systems serving a similarly-sized community. There are three primary reasons for this success. First, LTD has a long history of innovation. In areas such as accessible service, pricing, and bus rapid transit, LTD has always looked to the future. LTD was fully accessible before The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed, is a pioneer in implementing group bus pass programs, and is one of the first transit systems in the nation to implement a bus rapid transit system.

Second, LTD offers a wide range of transit services designed to provide connectivity to a variety of travelers, while also tailored to specific needs and opportunities. In addition to conventional bus services, LTD offers bus rapid transit, shuttles, special event service, demand-response service, ridesharing, and vanpooling. In providing transit services to a community, it is clearly not the case that "one size fits all".

Third, LTD has been fortunate to have a stable operating funding base and strong federal support for capital expansion. Federal funds have allowed LTD to build facilities for passengers, construct operating support facilities, purchase new and replacement buses, and begin building a bus rapid transit system.

EmX

EmX (pronounced "M-X", which is short for Emerald Express) is a full-featured bus rapid transit service. EmX emulates a light rail system with features such as exclusive transitways, transit signal priority, improved stops and stations, unique vehicles, and a different image than conventional bus systems.



The first EmX corridor connects downtown Eugene with downtown Springfield and opened for service in January 2007. It is difficult to overstate the interest and excitement that has been generated by the first EmX line. Ridership on this line immediately exceeded 20-year projections. Ridership has continued to increase, with boardings in 2008 exceeding 2007 totals by approximately 20 percent. The cost for the first line, including vehicles, was $24 million, which is approximately $6 million per mile.

In response to the exceptional success of the first EmX line, LTD (with community support) is working actively to expand the system. The second EmX line is one of the first to use the Small Starts funding program that was created by SAFETEA-LU. The project is fully funded and is in the final design process, with service expected to start in late 2010. Planning has started on a third EmX line to west Eugene.

While high-capacity transit investment has been employed almost exclusively in large metropolitan areas, LTD's experience with EmX demonstrates that high quality transit in communities the size of Eugene-Springfield can have a significant positive impact on the economic growth and livability of a community. A relatively small investment can have a very positive multiplier impact on improving a community's connectivity options.

Federal funding has been absolutely essential for the first two EmX lines and will be even more essential in any future expansion of the system. It is simply not possible to build the system without federal support.

Challenges

In the midst of large increases in ridership and the rousing success of the EmX system, LTD is facing problems in its operational budget that will require a reduction of service. Prices for diesel fuel have increased five fold in the past seven years, and the cost for RideSource, LTD's paratransit service for disabled persons, has quadrupled during that same period. These two factors, combined with a weakening economy, create a situation in which a service reduction that could exceed 10 percent must be made during a time that demand for transit service is very high.

While the economy will eventually turn around, it is expected that fuel costs will continue to rise and that demand for paratransit service will continue to increase. The aging baby boomer generation (which has been called "The Senior Tsunami") will create the need for continued expansion of demand-response service. That service, which is mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, competes for the same funds that are used for fixed-route service and EmX, which means that expansion of the demand-response service is at the expense of transit service for the general population.

Recommendations for Reauthorization of SAFETEA-LU

1. Increase the investment in our nation's transportation system. The backlog of infrastructure needs for all modes is significant and must be addressed.
2. Reflect the changing transportation environment and concerns regarding global warming and peak oil by placing a greater emphasis on transit and other alternative transportation modes to meet our future transportation needs.
3. Streamline project delivery. It takes too long and costs too much money for a project to go from concept to implementation.
4. Increase funding for FTA's Small Starts program. This program provides opportunities in medium-sized communities to implement cost-effective transit improvements.
5. Provide dedicated funding for bus replacement. Typically, bus replacement is funded with FTA formula funds, which are not sufficient to meet the need.
6. Provide operational funding for existing ADA-required paratransit services. This could be a formula-based program similar to the New Freedoms program that was created in SAFETEA-LU.