

ROCKINGHAM COUNTY, VIRGINIA

CART

**"Getting People Where
They Need to Go"**

By Charles Rutkowski

Almost anyone involved in a transit coordination project will testify to the fact that coordination takes time. Overcoming the inevitable hurdles, barriers and turf issues requires patience and persistence. The residents of Rockingham County, Virginia, along with a few passionate advocates, were patient and persistent — for seven years — and are now seeing the fruits of their labor.

Rockingham County is nestled in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, about 100 miles southwest of Washington, D.C. Harrisonburg, in the center of the county, has had a successful transit program available largely to city residents. Anyone living in the doughnut-shaped area surrounding the city had little access to public transit.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a group of human service agencies and transit advocates recognized that coordination could enhance the effectiveness of their client transportation services, and could also be the catalyst that would bring public transit to unserved residents of Rockingham County.

The first step, in April of 1996, was an ambitious one — the Community Association for Rural Transportation (known locally as CART) was incorporated as a nonprofit corporation. Incorporation at an early stage helped CART establish its legitimacy in the community, and also facilitated the pursuit and awarding of grants. Growth came quickly.

The system's first funding, a three-year grant for \$45,000, was received from the Blue Ridge Disability Services Board in June of 1996. This grant allowed CART to offer county residents with disabilities affordable trips to programs and services. A year later the system received a Section 5310 vehicle from the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation. In 1999, it was awarded a \$75,000 three-year grant from the Merck & Company Foundation and in 2000 was also approved for United Way support.

CART was building an innovative, diversified funding base, which was somewhat unusual for a transit program at its development stage. CART Board President Betty Newell played a key role after her arrival in the Valley in 1998. Newell, who was one of the Community Transportation Association's founders in the 1980s, volunteered her time to CART, all the while planning to retire. Newell recognized that a transit program with multiple diverse funding sources would be stronger, more resilient

Human service agencies and transit advocates; public and private dollars; federal, state and local support; buses and automobiles; volunteers and Yellow Cabs ... CART's everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach to mobility has built numerous partnerships, grown a diversified funding base, generated sharing arrangements and expanded transportation options in northwest Virginia.



The motto says it all: "Getting people where they need to go."

A mother and daughter take advantage of OCTI service in Elkton, Va.



Transportation Technical Assistance Program. The Technical Assistance Program, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, helped to identify the unmet transit needs of Rockingham County, and develop a strategy for meeting them through continued and expanded coordination efforts. Yet it was never easy.

With a detailed implementation plan in hand, Newell asked the county Board of Supervisors to endorse a request for public transportation funding in 2000 and 2001. Both times, the county declined. Next CART officials resubmitted the request to the Commonwealth of Virginia with the sponsorship of the town of Elkton.

The Commonwealth Transportation Board declined to grant investment to CART, citing the lack of a clear endorsement from Rockingham County. It was but a temporary setback.

Although public transit development efforts were — for the time being — deferred, CART leaders continued to build its network of specialized services. The Virginia Department for Aging awarded the system \$16,000 to subsidize trips for elderly and disabled clients. CART signed a contract with the Valley Program for Aging Service and the Shenandoah Area Agency for Aging to provide non-program trips for seniors in the region. In June 2001 — also after a third request — the Virginia Health Care Foundation issued a challenge grant to the system that required a 100 percent local match. Several smaller local foundations provided a portion of the match, but lacking the final \$30,000 CART was in danger of losing the entire grant.

CART asked for support from the Rockingham County Board of Supervisors, and at last its persistence was rewarded with county investment to complete the match requirements. The Health Care Foundation investment supports CART's CareConnection service that provides affordable transportation to health care within and beyond Rockingham County. CART assigns the trips to public transportation, volunteers or contracted taxi service. CareConnection has allowed the system to establish important partnerships with local private-sector operators and bring them into the



and, ultimately, more sustainable. The system's strategy revolved around building its capacity and reputation for human service transportation, while pursuing opportunities to launch services for the general public.

In 2000, the Association selected CART and Rockingham County for participation in its Rural Passenger



Cutting the ribbon: (from left) Dee Floyd, board chair and District 3 supervisor; Debra Oswalt, executive director, Virginia Health Care Foundation; Betty Newell, CART board president; Mike Breedon, District 5 supervisor; and Wayne Printz, mayor, Elkton, Va.

coordinated mix along with the human service partners.

In February of 2002, CART once again went to the County Board of Supervisors to endorse its third request for public transit funding. The staff and its riders were becoming familiar to the County Board, and the program's growing reputation for quality service helped convince the county to reverse the decision it had made a year earlier. With county support, the Commonwealth Transportation Board approved a public transportation demonstration grant. The 15-month demonstration launched a public transit linkage between Harrisonburg and the town of Elkton. The new flex-route service was named OCTI, an acronym for Our Community Transit Investment, and features a friendly green octopus as its logo.



Not surprisingly, the demonstration was a success, and earlier this year additional public transit funding was approved that will allow CART to purchase three additional vehicles, and initiate

a second flexible route. It's also allowed the system to hire its first executive director, Kimberly Hall.

Although CART began with a focus on the residents of Rockingham County, many of its medical trips and contracted service extend through adjacent counties. Thus the system now serves people in Page, Shenandoah, Staunton, Waynesboro and Augusta counties, providing critical linkages to vital services in Harrisonburg and Charlottesville.

Newell and her colleagues never ceased looking for new ways to expand service and transportation options in the community. In January 2003, CART became the designated Greyhound ticket agent for Harrisonburg. The system receives a 12 percent commission on Greyhound ticket sales, which will generate about \$30,000 in revenue this year. The commission revenue will serve as local match for state and federal grants.

Transportation coordination can take myriad forms, as CART ably proves. The system operates its own volunteer transportation services, and also serves as a broker. It assigns trips to OCTI — the system's backbone — or to local taxis and volunteers. Volunteers provide about 20 percent of CART trips, including nearly all out-of-county trips.

Volunteer drivers are regular or designated. Regular drivers are available to transport any passengers assigned to them. Designated drivers have volunteered to transport a particular individual, usually a friend or family member. Once a volunteer is registered with the system, they are fully insured, regardless of the size or ownership of the vehicle being driven. Volunteers drive their own vehicles, CART vehicles, or occasionally, the client's own vehicle if the client is unable to drive.

Taxis transport nearly all demand-responsive trips within Rockingham County. Once riders have registered and been certified as eligible, they may contact the Yellow Cab taxi service directly and schedule a trip. Pas-

sengers are responsible for a distance-based co-payment: CART reimburses the taxi service the balance of the fare. Yellow Cab is an active partner in the development of CART and carries the system's passengers at a discounted rate, as does ABC Cab.

Although the support mechanisms and logistics behind CART are complex, the system remains simple to use for its passengers. Schedulers will determine what type of service is appropriate for each trip request. When possible, passengers are assigned to existing flexible routes. Demand-responsive trip requests are encouraged to be made at least 24 hours in advance, and several days in advance for out-of-county trips. Because the local demand-responsive service is operated by Yellow Cab, it is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The fare structure is simple: \$1.00 per trip for fixed routes, and a distance-based co-payment for demand-responsive trips. The one-way co-payment for a trip of up to ten miles is \$3.00; for trips beyond ten miles, \$5.00, and for trips to Charlottesville, \$10.00. Co-payments are proportionately higher for longer out-of-county trips.

CART coordinates transportation services with as many other community organizations as possible. Sharing arrangements include staff drivers, volunteer drivers, vehicles, purchasing and training. A major barrier was hurdled this past year when the system obtained vehicle insurance through the Community Transportation Association of Virginia, which permits full sharing of vehicles and drivers.

For individuals who live far from traditional established services and whose work or childcare needs make public transportation exceedingly difficult, CART recognizes that the only practical solution to personal mobility may be an automobile. CART provides leadership for *Way To Go*, a broad-based community coalition that helps unemployed or underemployed persons obtain automobiles. The program depends upon donated and purchased used vehicles and can also fund repairs as well as initial insurance and registration costs. Financial support for *Way To Go* is provided by United Way and the Massanutten Presbyterian Church.

This year, CART is initiating a specialized employment transportation service for persons with disabilities. The Community Transportation Association selected the system as a grant recipient through its Joblinks program, providing

a \$50,000 planning grant to enhance mobility options for specialized work trips

Rockingham County and Harrisonburg have significant immigrant populations of Spanish-speaking, and more recently, Russian-speaking individuals. CART brochures have been available in Spanish, and in October 2003 in Russian as well. CART has hired a trip coordinator fluent in Russian.

CART has firmly embraced the concept of investment diversification, which has helped it not only grow, but become more efficient. For example, in its first year of operation, in 1998, CART's average cost per trip was \$13.19. In 2002, the average cost per trip was \$9.96. With the expansion of fixed route and out-of-county services this year, ridership will increase and unit costs should decline further. The system's funding sources range from large and traditional to small and unconventional. A lesson for other coordinated transit programs is that CART simply pursues every possible source of revenue. This year, they include:

- Federal Transit Administration Section 5310 and Section 5311.
- Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.
- Virginia Health Care Foundation.
- Greyhound ticket commissions.
- Rockingham County.
- Massanutten Presbyterian Church.
- United Way.
- Valley Program for Aging Services.
- Virginia Department for Aging.
- Shenandoah Area Agency for Aging.

- Blue Ridge Disability Services Board.
- Department of Justice Weed and Seed Program.
- Harrisonburg-Rockingham County Department of Social Services.
- Valley AIDS Network.
- Virginia Department of Rehabilitation Services.
- American Cancer Society.
- Town allocations.
- Local Ford and Nissan dealerships.
- Fares and copayments.

CART is in the midst of its most significant expansion to date, but is still seeking more support. The program is actively recruiting volunteers, not only to serve as drivers, but to offer any other skill that might be useful, including legal, data processing, clerical and interpreting/translating. Financial donors can sponsor a client, to assist riders whose multiple co-payments are a burden.

The most significant lesson learned from CART is that persistence and vision will eventually bring success. The system encountered a number of setbacks over the course of the past seven years. Whenever CART was unsuccessful in pursuing a grant, its staff and board simply redoubled their effort in pursuing more funding possibilities. Denial of a grant one year usually meant they would return with a stronger application next year. After all, the demand for more and better community transportation options in-and-around Rockingham County, Virginia is like that of many areas around the nation: it only grows. 🚗

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