

*A partnership among Keystone College, King's College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Commonwealth Medical College, University of Scranton, & Wilkes University*

## Planning, Land Use, Transportation & Infrastructure Task Force (PLuTI)

April 2012

### Introduction

In Pennsylvania, Regional Transportation Authorities (RTAs) plan, develop and coordinate the regional transportation system within the geographic area it is legislated to serve. RTAs have the power to acquire, construct, operate or lease any part of the public transportation system under their domain. RTAs can apply to the state and federal government for funding operations and capital expenditures, and they collect passenger revenue. RTAs have a board of directors and the members are identified in the enabling legislation.

### Background

Northeast Pennsylvania includes three public transportation (busing) organizations, an airport board and two rail authorities, a rail corporation, and a metropolitan planning organization.

In Lackawanna County, the County of Lackawanna Transit System (COLTS) provides county-wide bus services, shuttle services, and paratransit services. COLTS was formed and certified as a municipal authority in 1972 under the Municipal Authorities Act of 1945. COLTS replaced the Scranton Transit Company, which had provided electric trolley service and bus service since 1954. COLTS operates under a board of directors that establishes policies and guidelines. Board members are appointed by the County Commissioners to serve five-year terms.<sup>i</sup>

On June 23, 1972, local bus service in Luzerne County came to a halt in the wake of Hurricane Agnes floods. Within two (2) years the bus system was reconstituted under public sponsorship to become a model for bus systems nationwide. The transition from flood-emergency to normal transit service was due to the culmination of a Demonstration Project funded by the following agencies:

- Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA)
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT)
- City Demonstration Agency of Wilkes-Barre (CDA)
- Federal Disaster Assistance Administration (FDAA)
- Economic Development Administration (EDA)

The most unusual aspect was the provision of free bus service for a 101-day period following the devastating flood. This action, taken by the FDAA to relieve traffic congestion and to provide mobility for people housed in temporary mobile home parks, represented the first time in United States history when a free bus system operated for a sustained period throughout an urbanized area.

The Luzerne County Transportation Authority (LCTA) was established by the Board of Commissioners in order to administer this Demonstration Project, and to sustain transit beyond the Demonstration period. The LCTA, in turn, made arrangements with the area's two private transit operators, White Transit Company and Wilkes-Barre Transit Corporation, to continue operations under purchase-of-service agreements.

Today, in Luzerne County, the LCTA services forty-six (46) municipalities that include three cities (Wilkes-Barre, Nanticoke and Pittston). The LCTA consolidated services with the Luzerne/Wyoming County Transportation Department (LWCTD) on January 01, 2012, providing shared-ride service. The LCTA is divided into two divisions:

#### **Fixed Route**

- Service provided on a repetitive, fixed-schedule basis along a specific route with vehicles stopping to pick up and deliver passengers to specific locations

#### **Shared Ride**

- Non-fixed route service utilizing vans with passengers boarding and alighting at prearranged times at any location within the system's service area.

Like COLTS, LCTA continues to be a Municipal Authority and operates under a similar governance structure. There are nine (9) Board members. Board members will be appointed by the newly formed Luzerne County Council

COLTS and LCTA presently share bi-county bus routes. The LCTA is working with PennDOT for a possible with Hazleton Public Transit. Additionally, LCTA is studying the feasibility of building a compressed natural gas (CNG) fueling station.

Hazleton Public Transit (HPT) is part of the City of Hazleton's Department of Public Services. The system provides bus service in Hazleton and nine adjacent communities.<sup>ii</sup>

The Wilkes-Barre Scranton International Airport (AVP) is governed by an airport board consisting of the three Lackawanna County Commissioners and two members of the Luzerne County Council and the Luzerne County Manager. The airport has a full-time staff that operates the facility and also owns an adjacent business park.<sup>iii</sup>

The Pennsylvania Northeast Regional Railroad Authority (PNRRA) is the result of a merger between the former Monroe County Railroad Authority and the Lackawanna County Railroad Authority. PNRRA's rail system stretches from Carbondale to Scranton and from Scranton to the Delaware Water Gap. The rail line includes both passenger and freight services. The rail authority owns the property and the rail assets and contracts with railroad companies to operate the rail.<sup>iv</sup>

Rail service in Luzerne County is provided by the Luzerne County Rail Corporation (LCRC). The LCRC was assigned operating rights by the Luzerne County Redevelopment Authority (LCRA) in 1994. Incorporating the LCRC was done to shield the redevelopment authority from any liability in case of an accident or other type of incident. The LCRA owns the assets (trackage and the Right-Of-Way), and the LCRC solicits and selects the rail operator.

The Lackawanna/Luzerne Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), in conjunction with PENNDOT District 4-0 and Central Offices, decides which transportation projects receive federal funding in Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties. The MPO membership includes representatives from transit, rail, and aviation who work together to provide a safe and efficient transportation network for the 2-county region.

## Issues

COLTS and LCTA are in the process of evaluating potential bi-county bus routes. This move toward regional transportation planning is a step in the right direction. With multiple organizations and boards of directors, the current system is fragmented. Such fragmentation results in limited or no coordination among service providers, which prohibits the development of a convenient and connected transportation system. A fragmented system is also a weak competitor for scarce transportation funding. Many of Pennsylvania's other larger and regional transportation systems are more competitive for funding - both at the state and federal levels.

Additionally, with so many organizations providing complementary and connected services, overhead costs are high. Facilities and staff could, to some degree, consolidate and/or deploy into underserved areas. Regional systems can also benefit from economies of scale in purchases of capital equipment. In a time when energy costs are so high that it becomes prohibitive for vehicle owners to drive, there is an opportunity to reinvent public transportation to increase ridership. Further, the emergence of the natural gas drilling industry in Pennsylvania presents an opportunity to convert fleets and build fueling stations. This will make transit systems more competitive from a cost standpoint and also reduce environmental impacts.

## Policy Guidelines

Essentially, The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports the development and implementation of an RTA that would deliver a coordinated and connected regional transportation system and transit planning at an efficient cost. Quality of service, economies of scale, innovation, expansion (air travel and passenger rail) and facilitating connections to bike and pedestrian trails should serve as the basis for a regional transportation policy. An RTA should work collaboratively with the regional MPO.

## Policy Statement

The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development supports the formation of an RTA that encompasses the airport, bus lines, and rail. Given the economic interdependence of Lackawanna and Luzerne County, the commuter patterns of residents between the two counties, the number of residents who leave the region daily for employment, and the continued challenge of attracting more air carriers and flights, an RTA designation would enhance the integration of all modes of transit under which would be a combined transit authority and a stronger competitor for state and federal funding. The RTA should not only include representatives from the different modes of transportation, but also have geographical balance (from Carbondale in the north to Hazleton in the south), work collaboratively with the MPO and provide service to meet consumer demand. A regional RTA would also allow for increased operating efficiencies and create a regional system that addresses Northeast Pennsylvania's workforce needs.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.coltsbus.com>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.ridehpt.com>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.flyavp.com>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.pnrra.org>