

METRO-MOBILITY TALKS

Corpus Christi Regional Transportation Authority

25th Year Anniversary

The Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) provides bus service to more than five million riders per year. More than 40 percent take the bus to work, and more than 20 percent ride a city bus to school. With statistics like that, it's hard to imagine that at one time Corpus Christi residents debated whether the city needed a transit system at all, although some form of public transportation has been present in the city since the 1880s.

The RTA marks its 25th year of service in 2011, and so it's only natural to take a look back to see how far the bus system has come in that quarter century, the different forms public transportation has taken since Colonel Henry Lawrence Kinney founded the city as a trading post in 1839, and where the regional bus system is headed in the future.

The impetus to create the RTA began in the early 1980s with, among other things, the election of Ronald Reagan as president. Reagan, in an effort to reduce federal spending, proposed reducing operating subsidies to the nation's transit systems, threatening the survival of smaller systems like Corpus Christi. At the time, the City of Corpus Christi operated the city's bus system as the Corpus Christi Transit System, a division of the Corpus Christi Traffic Department. A limited budget (\$1 million in federal grants, \$1 million in operating revenues, and \$1 million from the city's general fund) restricted the bus system to serving only core areas of the city and the Westside.

"Every year getting the city to include \$1 million in its budget to maintain the status quo was a big fight because we were jockeying with every other city department for funding," said John Bell, a Corpus Christi attorney whose firm represents the RTA and who served as an assistant city attorney in the early 1980s. Bell, an attorney for Wood, Boykin & Wolter, PC, the RTA's legal counsel, described the bus system as being "stuck in a '50s or '60s mode."

A Reporter's Observations

In a February 12, 1984, article in the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, a newspaper staff writer, who for several days used the city's bus system as her sole means of transportation, said the trouble with the Corpus Christi Transit System was that "you can't always get where you want to go when you want to get there. The bus will take you to an appointment south of South Padre Island Drive by 10 a.m., but it won't bring you back until after 3 p.m. and it won't take you anywhere after 8 at night."

The article went on to mention unmarked bus stops, a lack of schedules on city buses, and the fact that all 12 bus routes passed through downtown. It also described the now-defunct downtown Woolworth's as "unofficial transit central" with bus timetables "well hidden behind the Harlequin and Silhouette Special Edition romances."

In another article in the same edition, the city's transit system was described by its director, Tom Niskala, as a minimal operation with 46 full-size buses, 12 regular routes, no Sunday service, and some areas of the city as almost inaccessible by bus, including the rapidly growing Southside. "Many routes are only once an hour, some are every half hour," said Niskala, who became director of the Corpus Christi Transit System in 1981. "One line in is every 20 minutes. To decrease beyond this level, you'd have to discontinue service."

Had that occurred, the city would have been without public transportation for the first time since mule-drawn coaches ferried passengers in the 1880s. The "herdies," as they were called, were the first known transportation system in Corpus Christi. Named for the designer, Peter Heredic, these covered coaches seated 10 and roamed the city picking up freight and passengers.

Public Transit System in the Early Days'

By 1890, steam-powered streetcars had made their debut, although they were to be short-lived in Corpus Christi. Developer E.H. Ropes, who built the Alta Vista Hotel on the bayfront, added street railway tracks from the railroad station to the hotel and to a spot near what is now Seaside Memorial Cemetery. Small steam locomotives, outfitted with streetcar shells to avoid frightening horses ridden by many residents, pulled rail coaches along the tracks. First operated in June 1890, the Corpus Christi Improvement Company operated two steam locomotives over 6.5 miles of track - until The Panic of 1893 forced its closure.

The first electric streetcars arrived in 1910 when Daniel Hewitt organized Corpus Christi Street and Interurban Railway using Ropes's old tracks. Hewitt operated four cars and charged five cents. The Henley brothers of Denver quickly bought the system and furnished their own power by building the city's third power plant. The system eventually expanded to seven cars, with wires that provided power to the system running above the street. In 1914, the Philadelphia firm of Newberger, Henderson & Loeb bought out the Henleys, changed the name to Corpus Christi Railway and Light Company, and added more tracks and 10 new energy-efficient cars. But the 1919 hurricane destroyed most of the system and it never fully recovered. By 1920, only six cars were in use and ridership had fallen as automobile ownership grew.

Public Transportation Providers in the 1920's to 1960's

The first buses to travel city streets arrived in 1925 and when Central Power and Light Company (CP&L) purchased the system it added three new buses. By 1931, electric streetcars had been removed from service and CP&L printed the first route maps and schedules. Deciding to concentrate on power production, CP&L sold the system, and the new owners renamed it the Nueces Transportation Company. The Nueces Transportation Company had 13 buses at the time, a number that increased to 65 by 1940 and 105 by 1945, when annual ridership - driven by restrictions in automobile usage as part of the war effort - rose to 18.3 million.

But when the war ended, restrictions on automobile usage ended and ownership rose precipitously. Ridership dropped to 3.4 million in 1963 and Nueces Transportation Company, facing financial hardship, decided to either sell or close. The City of Corpus Christi, not wanting to see bus service end, began negotiations with the company, and on January 1, 1966, assumed operation of the bus system under an interim leasing agreement and, following voter approval of a bond sale, became the sole owner on October 1, 1966. The fleet consisted of 45 buses.

By 1984, the number of buses had decreased to 35, funds were scarce, and maintenance costs continued to rise. Although vehicle miles had increased only 13 percent, the city had increased in size by 200 percent. But in the previous year, the city had taken the first step in what would eventually result in the RTA when the City Council appointed a 29-member Transit Advisory Committee to study the city's transit needs. Prior to that, enabling legislation authorizing creation of a metropolitan transit authority in the region had passed the Texas Legislature.

Pat Eisenhower, who in 1982 served as president of the Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce, agreed to chair the committee at the request of then-mayor Luther Jones. "I told him, 'I don't know anything about buses and didn't want to know anything about buses,' " Eisenhower recalled in a recent interview, "but Luther Jones was a hard man to say no to, and I ended up saying yes."

Committee Tasked With Accessing City's Transit Needs

The Transit Advisory Committee was charged with answering three questions: *Does Corpus Christi need a transit system? If so, does the system need to reach beyond the city limits? If there is to be a transit system, how shall it be financed?*

One of the first actions the committee took was to take a city bus to San Antonio to meet with officials at VIA Metropolitan Transit, which had begun operations in 1978 after voters approved creation and funding of VIA through a half-cent sales tax.

Twelve committee members and six city staff members traveled to San Antonio on a city bus, Eisenhower said, driven by the system's chief mechanic "so that if it broke down he could fix it" and began to learn what bad shape the bus system was in. "They hadn't purchased new buses in a long time and the ones they had were in bad shape."

Not surprisingly, the Transit Advisory Committee recommended to the City Council the creation of a Regional Transit Authority (it later changed its name to Regional Transportation Authority) and so the council created the RTA by ordinance and named a five-member interim board consisting of Eisenhower as chairman, Pat Sullivan, Liz Flores, Francisco Rodriguez III, and Joe Adame.

Voters Approve Half-Cent Sales Tax Increase to Fund the RTA

Although it existed as an independent political entity, the RTA had no operating funds, which meant voters would have to approve a sales tax increase to fund it. Before calling for an election, however, the board conducted what it called the "People Project" to find out through a series of public meetings what residents wanted in a public transportation system. From those meetings, a preliminary service plan arose, and in May 1985 the board asked the City Council to call an election asking voters to authorize a half-cent sales tax increase to fund the RTA.

The board turned to Betty Turner, who had previously served on City Council and would later become mayor, to run the election campaign to convince voters to approve the half-cent sales tax increase and create an 11-member governing

board. Turner, who now owns a real estate company in Port Aransas, said the Regional Transit Authority Support Committee decided to focus campaign efforts on the Westside using Spanish-language media to promote voter turnout among the people who used the bus system and to avoid raising the topic in the South or Northwest sides of the city.

Businessman Francisco Rodriguez III, radio talk show host Victor Lara, and American GI Forum founder Dr. Hector P. Garcia played an important role in generating support among the Westside community. "We had to hit the people who had a vested interest, who had an interest in making this happen," she said.

No organized opposition arose, not even from the Corpus Christi Taxpayers Association, which in the 1980s and 1990s proved a formidable force in opposing bond issues and proposed sales tax increases.

President Donna Shirley told the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* for a July 28, 1985, article that the issue failed to capture the two-thirds majority vote required for a public position by the Corpus Christi Taxpayers Association. Some liked the idea of using sales tax instead of property tax to fund the RTA, she said. "Our vote was pretty evenly split, and because our bylaws say we need a two-thirds majority on a controversial issue, we have not taken a position," Shirley said.

On August 10, 1985, Corpus Christi voters approved the half-cent sales tax increase by a margin of 64.9 percent in favor and 35.1 percent opposed, and voters in Robstown, Driscoll, Agua Dulce, Gregory and San Patricio City also voted themselves into the authority. Port Aransas joined the authority in 1987. In Corpus Christi, Westside and Southside precincts supported the proposition, while voters in the Northwest voted against it. The election also created an 11-member board to oversee operations. The City Council appointed Eisenhower (chosen as the first chairman), Pat Sullivan, Francisco Rodriguez, Joe Adame, and Elizabeth Flores. The Nueces County Commissioners Court appointed attorney Ben Donnell, Corpus Christi developer Ralph Durden, and Robstown retailer Julius Leshin. Robstown's mayor appointed grocery store manager, Amado Aguilar, and Gregory's mayor appointed school administrator Ofelia Avila.

Transition of Bus Operations and RTA's Transportation Goals

By January 1986, the RTA assumed operations of the Corpus Christi Transit System with no cash reserves, no usable maintenance facility, and a debt to the city of \$3 million for the purchase of buses and inventory. It also had made a commitment to increase service hours and routes, purchase clean, air-conditioned buses, investigate the feasibility of high-speed water transportation, and improve services for seniors and handicapped citizens. Although collection of the half-cent sales tax began on January 1, 1986, the RTA had to wait more than three months before the money could be collected by the city, sent to the state, and paid to the RTA.

Bell said the RTA staff spent much of the first year helping city transit employees make the transition from city employees to RTA employees, leasing new facilities downtown and getting them operational, expanding the route system, starting a park-and-ride system between Naval Air Station Corpus Christi and both Gregory and Robstown, and expanding services to individuals with disabilities.

One of the more notable issues the RTA dealt with in its early years was the idea of implementing a high-speed water transportation system across Corpus Christi Bay. The idea was to link Naval Station Ingleside with Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, decreasing the distance traveled from 45 miles by automobile to 10 miles by watercraft. Other possible destinations included downtown Corpus Christi, Port Aransas and Padre Island. But studies showed that the idea did not make economic sense. Factors that contributed to scuttling the idea included a market study that questioned the project's economic feasibility, difficulty in finding a suitable boat and uncertainty about the future of Naval Station Ingleside.

Instead, the RTA focused on expanding traditional transportation services and hired the advertising firm of Morehead Dotts & LaPorte, which developed the system's color scheme and "The B" moniker still in use today, to promote bus ridership. The RTA also expanded services to people with disabilities, a decision encouraged by federal mandates, including passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Public Transportation Makes Big Advancements in Services

In its first five years of operations, the RTA expanded to 24 routes and five Park & Ride routes and increased services to the elderly and handicapped through Care B and Senior B services. It also purchased property and renovated facilities to create its Bear Lane Operations/Maintenance Facility, implemented a trolley program, and entered into a cooperative agreement with the City of Corpus Christi for a radio communications system.

The radio system not only assisted bus riders, it enhanced public safety by allowing city and county law enforcement officials to communicate with one another. Prior to obtaining the new radio communications system, the police department, sheriff's department, and fire department used separate, dedicated radio systems that prevented them from communicating with one another.

The new radio system came about as part of the RTA's effort to comply with provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act by providing audible voice announcements to the visually impaired using a system featuring GPS technology. The RTA applied for and received federal grants to install the system, which provided the backbone that, once the various public safety departments purchased radios, allowed them to talk to one another.

Although improving its fleet and other RTA facilities has been the main focus of the RTA, Bell said, it also has sent millions of dollars in revenues to the City of Corpus Christi and other municipalities within the RTA service area to pay for street improvement projects. Much progress has been made in equipping RTA buses with wheelchair lifts, he said, and street improvements make it easier for people who use wheelchairs to navigate city sidewalks.

"Prior to 1990, it was rare to have a bus with a wheelchair lift; now all the buses have lifts," Bell said. "But it doesn't help if you have a wheelchair lift on a bus if you can't get the wheelchair down the sidewalk."

The RTA's first offices were located on Antelope Street in downtown Corpus Christi, a building known by many as the temporary post office building. The RTA later purchased a former bank building in Six Points to use as its administrative offices before moving to the Bear Lane facilities, combining its maintenance and administrative functions at one site.

The RTA's Focus For The Future

Today, in addition to providing fixed-route bus services to more than 16,000 riders per week, the RTA provides commuter service to the Corpus Christi Army Depot and other federal agencies, operates the Corpus Christi Harbor Ferry, and provides transportation services to rural communities. It also helps residents create vanpools and rideshare programs and provides demand-response origin-to-destination service for more than 190,000 disabled riders per year.

"The RTA provides a lot of good services in this community and as we get into more and more climate change or energy conservation the RTA will continue to play a more vital role," said W.O. "Bill" Harrison, who served as the RTA's second chairman.

Harrison, who said the RTA was in great shape by the time he became chairman, said the transfer station at Six Points is an example of work done during his tenure that shows how the RTA can play a pivotal role in economic development. The Six Points Transfer Station helped spur renewed interest in the area that has paid dividends to the community economically and culturally.

Bell said the three transfer stations the RTA has built have made using the bus system easier and less time-consuming. In the old days, every bus route included a trip to downtown Corpus Christi. "To get from Weber to Everhart or Staples you had to go downtown to catch a different bus to come out," he said. "Transfer stations made a big difference in the way the system is structured."

As for the future, Bell, who has attended almost every RTA board meeting since its inception, says the RTA, which recently hired a new executive director, must deal with budget curtailments, reduced fare box revenues, lower tax revenues, route improvements, purchasing a new harbor ferry, and continued improvements to sidewalks and curb cuts.

If you have any questions regarding this or other Metro-Mobility Talks articles please contact us at ccmpo@cctxmpo.us or visit our website at www.corpuschristi-mpo.org