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YOUR TICKET TO RIDE!
A Grand Jury Report on Mendocino Transit Authority

May 12, 2009

Summary

Mendocino Transit Authority (MTA) serves a population of 90,000 over 2,800 square miles. Each year, its 36 passenger vehicles travel 881,000 miles over 12 routes that include connections to Lake County Transit in Ukiah, Santa Rosa City buses, AMTRAK, Greyhound, Sonoma County Airport Express and Golden Gate Transit. MTA was established in 1976 as a Joint Powers Agency by the County of Mendocino and the incorporated cities of Fort Bragg, Point Arena, Ukiah and Willits. Routes, fares and general information are available online at www.4mta.org.

Three years into implementing a five-year Short Range Transit Development Plan (SRTDP), MTA has become a poster child for the benefits of planning, on-going assessment and feedback as effective management tools. The Grand Jury found well-maintained facilities and vehicles, systematic training and low turnover among staff. Low fares, user-friendly routes and schedules, courteous drivers and clean, safe vehicles all contributed to an overall increase of 2.9% in ridership in 2007-08. For 2008-09, ridership is up 8.3% through November over the same period last year.

MTA's primary operating funding comes from a county-wide 1/4% sales tax authorized by California's 1971 Transportation Development Act (TDA). This public funding is mandated by law to ensure transportation for those with limited mobility. For Fiscal Year 2006-07, farebox revenue accounted for 17.6% of operating costs, comfortably exceeding the 14.7% minimum requirement. Even with increased costs, the farebox ratio in 2007-08 was 14.9%. MTA strives to serve seniors and the disabled, to coordinate routes and schedules with schools and colleges, and to reach residents of low income and remote communities. The agency bases service on monthly ridership data and an annual review of unmet transportation needs.

In addition to operating its own fleet, MTA provides purchasing and maintenance services for Senior Center buses, Mendocino County Bookmobile and Animal Care and Control mobile pet clinic, and vehicles operated by the Department of Veteran's Affairs. MTA near-term plans include: converting to more fuel-efficient/alternative energy vehicles, establishing a regional transit center in Ukiah, coordinating commuter van and car pools, and transforming the outdated maintenance and administration center in Ukiah into a model facility for efficient, affordable, *green* transit operations.

Methods

Grand Jury members reviewed documents, conducted site visits and interviews and rode buses on several routes to assess the condition and location of bus stops and the quality and timeliness of service. Schedules, routes and fare information were obtained from the Mendocino Transit Authority website.

Background

MTA was established in 1976 as a *Joint Powers Agency*, an independent body chartered by the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors and the city councils of the County's four incorporated cities: Fort Bragg, Point Arena, Ukiah and Willits, to provide county-wide transit services.

MTA receives its primary funding from the 1971 Transportation Development Act (TDA). This revenue comes from a 1/4% Mendocino County sales tax that is allocated, each year, to transit and other transportation programs by the Mendocino Council of Governments (MCOG). MCOG is also a Joint Powers Agency with a board of directors composed of seven elected officials appointed by the county and the four city councils.

In March 2004, MTA received a Transit Technical Planning Grant to develop a Short Range Transit Development Plan (SRTDP). The completed plan was adopted by the MTA board of directors in April 2005 and has become the blueprint for MTA operations and assessment through 2010. MTA's Mission Statement and Goals are contained in the SRTDP. The mission is: ***To provide safe, courteous, reliable and affordable transportation service.***

The SRTDP sets annual goals for service, marketing and system improvements for each of the five years from 2005 through 2010. The Grand Jury's numbered findings are organized to provide an overview of the MTA structure, facilities and operations and to document progress toward the following goals, as specified in the SRTDP.

- *Provide affordable, reliable and efficient transit service that effectively meets the local transportation needs of those residents of, or visitors to, MTA's service area who have limited mobility options. Where practical, also serve the needs of those who choose transit for some, or all, of their local travel needs for environmental or lifestyle reasons.*
- *Provide a regional link to local destinations and to inter-city transportation alternatives and destinations outside Mendocino County.*
- *Operate as efficiently and economically as possible, in order to maximize the amount of service provided. Ensure the financial stability of MTA.*
- *Support county and local land use planning, economic development, travel demand management, congestion mitigation and environmental goals, where practical.*

Findings

Structure, Staffing and Facilities

1. The MTA governing board consists of seven members: three county appointees and one member appointed by each city. Typically, three or four board members are elected officials.
2. Board meetings are open to the public. Dates and locations are published on the MTA website. Meetings rotate among the four member cities.
3. For eight of the twelve monthly meetings, video conferencing equipment in Fort Bragg is used to connect participants on the coast with those in Ukiah. This has greatly improved participation. Staff reported that the \$20,000 investment in telecommunications equipment has been recovered through savings in time and travel costs.
4. The General Manager reports to the board of directors and supervises a team of four line managers: Transportation, Maintenance, Marketing/Planning and Finance/Personnel.
5. The Transportation Manager oversees five supervisors who manage and support drivers and dispatchers.
6. The Maintenance Manager has two mechanics; two helper mechanics, and a cleaner to maintain the entire fleet of more than forty passenger and service vehicles.
7. The Marketing/Planning Manager and Finance/Personnel Manager, each have one full-time and one part-time assistant.
8. The Marketing/Planning Manager responds to complaints from the public and works closely with the General Manager on planning and grant writing.
9. MTA management decisions and strategies are based on financial and ridership data that are reviewed at monthly board meetings. Public release of annual information is often delayed by an overly cumbersome process for developing the agency's annual report.
10. MTA employs approximately 60 individuals, most of them full time. About 50 of these are drivers. The agency has been unionized (Teamsters Local 624) since January 1, 2006.
11. The initial collective bargaining agreement, signed in March 2006 resulted in a 12% pay increase for drivers and 10% for mechanics retroactive to January 2006. Even so, a parity study conducted at that time indicated that MTA drivers still earn less than their peers in other nearby and rural districts.
12. Drivers and dispatchers select their shifts by seniority. Several employees split their time between driving and dispatching.
13. Turnover is low and most promotions are from within the organization.¹
14. MTA typically hires and then trains its own drivers. People skills are viewed as a paramount requirement for drivers. All drivers must meet formal government requirements.

¹ The 2006/07 Annual Report states that as of 6/30/07, 69.5% of the employees had worked for MTA more than seven years (average was 14.3 years) and the most senior employee had 27 years of service.