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STRATEGIES FOR AN INTRA-URBAN CIRCULATOR SYSTEM

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Currently, there are several urban communities nationwide that have implemented trolley/circulators or that are in the process of developing such services. In the absence of any available guides in the subject area, public transportation organizations in Florida (e.g., in St. Petersburg and Tampa) and across the nation are interested in the development of a resource that can identify characteristics and key features of successful circulator systems.

In general, proponents of central business development and smart growth have been among the supporters of circulator systems in downtown cores. Nostalgia and historical flavor render the trolley (fixed and non-fixed guide-way) one of the most favored modes. Developers view such systems as means for increasing access to downtown businesses while smart growth proponents view them as a means of revitalizing the downtowns to slow the rate of sub-urbanization. However, while several urban communities have recently implemented trolley services, or are in the process of developing them, currently there are no guidelines for implementation and operation of the service.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to develop a synthesis of existing trolley/circulator systems in Florida and other select systems around the country, to identify (1) key characteristics for developing an effective circulator system and (2) critical operating strategies. Case studies identifying key elements of successful practices are included and will be an important resource for those interested in learning about successful strategies for circulator system implementation. The final report provides general guidelines from which individual Florida communities and others across the country or elsewhere can develop systems unique to their needs.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Researchers performed a comprehensive literature review of circulator systems, which provided insights into the different goals and objectives of such systems, as well as characteristics of successful systems. Several operating agencies throughout the country were surveyed and current practices of evaluating circulator systems identified. A review of current practices indicated that the major determinant of success for these systems was effectively serving the public purpose for which they were established. Diversity in the goals of the different systems demonstrated, however, that what is acceptable to one community in terms of performance might be totally unacceptable to another community. Based on the review of current practices, researchers identified several circulator systems as notable based on remarkable success and/or other unique circumstances or experiences. The final report provides discussion of these findings, in addition to three in-depth case studies (i.e., of systems in St. Petersburg, Tampa, and Coral Gables).

Researchers developed several strategies for success, which encompass the following factors: service goals, service characteristics, fares, service delivery method, connectivity, identity, marketing, partnerships, and funding. The research makes clear that there is no "one size fits all" approach to the successful planning and operation of intra-urban circulators, as each system and operating environment is unique. Thus, in terms of performance, it may not be very effective to compare different community circulators on the basis of statistics such as ridership. Rather, each community should determine how the performance will be measured (e.g., by comparing results to stated goals or purpose). Key characteristics that make other transit modes successful, such as frequency and reliability, also are important for intra-urban circulators. Whether or not a part of an area's primary transit service, an intra-urban circulator should have effective connections to other existing transit service and other modes, such as pedestrian-friendly areas and parking facilities. In addition, appropriate marketing efforts can assist in making a circulator integral to a community.

This research has demonstrated the importance of local partnerships in the planning, development, and operation of intra-urban circulators. Business development concerns should be considered and addressed early in the planning process. The relationships with businesses can also be fostered and continued as the service is implemented. Such partnerships can b+be important for securing funding.

BENEFITS

This research synthesis presents effective development and operational strategies for intra-urban circulator systems. Because of growing interest in reintroducing trolleys and circulators in downtown cores, it is essential that urban communities, both large and small, be provided with ample information on potential strategies from which to develop system objectives. The results of this study should be of interest to transit service providers, transportation professionals, downtown developers and businesses, transportation funding agencies, and other similar entities.

Researchers provide information regarding not only intra-urban bus circulators, but streetcar systems, which often serve as circulators and share many of the same market and service characteristics as their bus counterparts. It is anticipated that by examining bus and streetcar systems concurrently, this report has produced a more comprehensive set of indicators for a successful circulator system.

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