

City of Rochester, New York**Location:** Monroe County**Population:** 190,732 (2008)**Ethnic composition:** 47% White, 42% Black or African American, 13% Hispanic or Latino**Median age:** 30.8 years**Adults ages 45 to 64:** 44,126**Adults ages 64 and older:** 17,347**Percentage of adults ages 45 and older compared with total population:** 32%**Median household income:** \$30,927 (2007)

Other key information: Rochester is the headquarters for the Rochester Genesee Regional Transportation Authority (RGRTA), which serves the city and seven surrounding counties (Monroe, Genesee, Livingston, Orleans, Wayne, Wyoming, and Seneca). Over 1 million people reside within this seven-county region, and 35% are ages 45 and older. Monroe County has the largest population compared with the other six counties. (2000)

MOBILITY | TRANSPORTATION

Industry: Public Benefit Corporation/Local Government Agency

CHALLENGE

The Rochester Genesee Regional Transportation Authority (RGRTA) in 2004 projected a \$27.5 million cumulative operating deficit (40% of its total budget) by the end of fiscal year 2008. The obvious solution was to cut bus services and raise fares. But the RGRTA instead made strategic decisions to cancel unproductive bus routes, add more service to popular routes, and seek funds through partnerships with private businesses.

Bus service cuts and fare increases hit older adults particularly hard. For many of them, easy access to affordable, reliable transportation is key to remaining independent and continuing to live at home. Yet fees for public transit can—and often do—increase to a point where many older adults on fixed incomes cannot afford them. As a result, they must restrict their travel, even cutting back on grocery shopping and visits to doctors and other health care practitioners. This can lead to poor nutrition and a lack of timely medical attention, both of which significantly increase older adults' susceptibility to illness and disease. Lack of transit can also cause older adults to become isolated, which puts them at risk for depression and loneliness.

SOLUTION

The RGRTA is governed by a 13-member board of commissioners made up of officials from Rochester, greater Monroe County, and surrounding counties. To overcome the deficit, the RGRTA built new partnerships with local schools, other institutions, and even private developers to subsidize operations and keep open routes that might otherwise have been eliminated. Strategic business partners included the Rochester City School District, the Rochester Institute of Technology, the State University of New York (SUNY) at Brockport and Geneseo, Nazareth College, Bryant & Stratton College, and apartment owners.

In developing these partnerships, the RGRTA looked at where services were used, and at who might be interested in either preserving routes or, in some cases, establishing new routes. For example, the RGRTA set up an innovative partnership with the developer of a local apartment complex to ensure bus service for the complex. The RGRTA also contracted with the Rochester Institute of Technology to provide service to and from campus throughout the week and on weekends, which brings in more than \$1 million a year.

The RGRTA also used various performance measures to improve service quality. The Route Productivity Index (RPI), for example, measured the effectiveness and efficiency of scheduling service to meet customer demand productivity. The RPI looks at how much revenue is generated per mile of service. It also measures the number of people served per revenue mile. The RGRTA then used this information to make service changes, which resulted in more efficient operations and greater productivity. For example, even though the RGRTA is driving fewer miles, it has still increased ridership.

As another strategy, the RGRTA promoted the importance of excellence in customer service and made changes that resulted in happier customers. One significant change, for example, was to replace a 35-year-old fare system based on zones with one uniform fare regardless of zone.

RESULTS

Following these changes, ridership increased more than 20% over the past four years, substantially increasing revenue. The projected deficit of \$27.5 million was turned into a \$19 million surplus—a turnaround of more than \$46 million. The targeted approach to improving customer service led to happier customers, as measured by the Transit Organization Performance Scorecard (TOPS), a nationally recognized customer satisfaction index. Also benefiting from the changes are community and social service providers. RGRTA Chief Executive Officer Mark Aesch says, “In addition to the clear economic advantages, the effort resulted in enhancing access to social services and improving employability in the region.”



AGING WELL BENEFITS—MOBILITY/TRANSPORTATION

The RGRTA specifically considered the needs of older adults and younger people with disabilities as part of its planning and strategy development, resulting in operational changes that improve access and help older adults age in place. The Rochester transportation story exemplifies at least four of the five basic principles identified by the Beverly Foundation as critical when planning for effective transportation services for older adults:

- Availability (exists when needed)—The RGRTA solicited customer feedback on route preferences and used this information to modify its service.
- Accessibility (reach and use for mobility-impaired passengers)—The RGRTA focused on the needs of these riders early in the planning process, and made changes that improved access.
- Acceptability (clean, safe vehicles and courteous staff)—RGRTA had good results in this area as measured by TOPS.
- Affordability (modest fees; defray costs for low-income users when possible)—The fare for all riders is just \$1, the same as it was in 1995.
- Adaptability (modified or adjusted to meet special needs)—The RGRTA offers Lift Line, a door-to-door paratransit service for individuals who meet certain eligibility requirements related to disability.

Today, lack of available transportation and unaffordable transit fees are often formidable barriers to independence for many older adults. They may not drive their own vehicles any longer, or they may simply be interested in using a more affordable, environmentally friendly mode of travel. Being able to get to and from local destinations for the basic supplies needed to run a household and maintain good health is critical.

Looking to the future, more older adults will have spent their adult lives driving from place to place. In many cases, they will have chosen a home in a place where the only mode of transportation available is the automobile. Yet as neighborhood populations age, residents will need transit more than ever before. For older adults who no longer drive, public transportation is the only alternative to asking for a ride when they need to go outside their immediate neighborhood, such as to a medical or dental appointment. Indeed, surveys among older adults reveal that they plan to use public transit to get around, even if they live in areas where there's no public transportation available today. The RGRTA approach provides one method for supporting city transit services during difficult fiscal times, and at the same time supports older adults who would otherwise be stranded and isolated in their homes.



PROMISING PRACTICES—LESSONS LEARNED

- Address budget shortfalls through entrepreneurial efforts instead of cost-cutting.
- Seek creative partnerships with private entities.
- Leverage funds from different sources to meet affordable transportation needs.
- Use appropriate performance measures to guide strategies and measure success.
- Focus on customer service and satisfaction to both improve service and boost revenues.

REFERENCES

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This case study is part of [Aging Well in Communities: A Toolkit for Planning, Engagement & Action](#). This toolkit includes a community planning overview; guides for resident surveys, public forums, and focus groups; case studies; and a list of aging-related resources. For the complete toolkit, visit <http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/services/CHCC/aging-well.htm>.

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