

**Final Report on the Young Professionals Bus Challenge**

**Prepared by the Greater Omaha Young Professionals**

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## **Executive Summary**

The Greater Omaha Young Professionals launched its first Young Professionals Bus Challenge (Challenge) April 18 - May 9, 2009. The Challenge encouraged young professionals and other community members to utilize our current bus system and use their feedback about their riding experiences to assess the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities to improve the bus system in Omaha. The Young Professionals has focused on public transportation as one of its key public policy issues in response to the constant feedback received on this issue.

Using the Challenge Web site, YPBusChallenge.com, 174 participants formed 54 teams and registered for the Challenge. Participants logged each Metro Area Transit (MAT) bus trip taken from April 18 – May 9, 2009. Teams were scored based on the average number of trips per team member, and the top three scoring teams received prizes. Throughout the course of the Challenge, 40 teams logged a total of 1,680 trips. Fourteen teams, made up of 38 individuals signed up to participate but never logged a trip.

For three weeks following the completion of the Challenge, participants were invited to complete a 42-question on-line survey concerning their experiences on Omaha's bus system during the Challenge. Organizers also invited people who wanted to take the Challenge, but were unable to participate to take the survey. In total, 315 people took the survey with additional qualitative feedback gathered from the survey, Young Professionals forum discussions, participants' e-mails to the Challenge organizers and comments on Twitter. These qualitative, anecdotal responses totaled over 1,000 responses from young professionals concerning the city's bus system.

The survey respondents demographically reflect the Young Professionals population in Omaha with regard to age: nearly 60 percent of respondents were between 23 and 35 years old. Forty percent of respondents live in Midtown and 78 percent have at least a Bachelor's degree. One quarter of respondents report using Omaha's bus system as a "usual mode of transportation," while 94 percent own a personal automobile. Ninety-two percent of those surveyed believe that improving mass transit is an important focus for Young Professionals in Omaha and should remain a priority for the organization. Further, it was clear that survey participants generally believe in the societal benefits of public transportation and are therefore more likely to use the system.

### **Key findings from survey and anecdotal feedback**

- The heavy overlap between respondents who own a car and also use the bus system as a usual mode of transportation implies that young professionals are taking the bus by choice – not by necessity - with just over one-third of respondents saying that they expect to ride the bus at least once or twice per week.
- Of the 47 percent of all respondents who expect to ride the bus rarely or less in the future, 54 percent reported that the schedule is inconvenient, 47 percent reported a lack of service, 42 percent reported the system is too slow, 33 percent prefer to use personal vehicles, and 32 percent indicated the routes are too difficult to understand.
- Factors such as age, gender, education and income level significantly impacted the reasons people cited for not riding the bus in the future.
- It was not clear that the price of gasoline rising to \$3 per gallon would be an effective motivator for increased bus usage.
- Most respondents reported satisfaction on the timeliness of buses, although it was widely noted that buses are more likely to be late in the afternoon. Further, riders felt that if the bus is early, it should wait at the bus stop until it is scheduled to depart.
- It was widely held that access to route maps is not good, and that the MAT Web site's and the Trip Planner on the site, are not intuitive or user-friendly. Many respondents indicated that maps showing the direction of routes should be posted at bus stops, along with route numbers servicing the stop.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the feedback received through the Challenge survey and other related means, the Young Professionals recommend the following (further details in full report):

- MAT should work with employers to promote employee stipends for public transportation and effectively communicate the availability of such subsidies.
- MAT should develop strategic relationships with the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), Creighton University, and Metro Community College and market specifically to the student population.
- MAT and city leaders should aggressively pursue new funding from diverse sources for public transportation in Omaha and launch a campaign to educate residents about the community and economic benefits of having an enhanced public transportation system.
- MAT should enhance its image through rebranding and by partnering with other organizations to expand the support for a strong public transportation system, with a focus on breaking existing stereotypes and stigmas attached to MAT riders.
- MAT should add more routes to high-density areas and more Park and Ride options to lower density areas.
- The Omaha metro/five-county area should consider developing a transportation master plan that is not limited to the expansion of roads.
- If a functional public transportation system remains a long term goal for Omaha, the region must establish policies that reward residents and business that relocate or build near existing public transportation infrastructure.

## **Conclusion**

The Challenge provided a rich opportunity to gather meaningful feedback from participants and others about the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement of the City's bus system. The full report following this executive summary details the full findings from the Challenge survey and gathering of anecdotal feedback and offers additional recommendations for how MAT, city leaders and community members can work together to enhance our bus system and, in doing so, strengthen our community and bolster our ability to retain and attract talented young professionals.

## **Challenge Overview**

The mission of the Greater Omaha Young Professionals is to serve as a catalyst organization to attract and retain young professionals in the Greater Omaha area through engagement, opportunity and advocacy. Over the past year and a half, the Young Professionals expanded its advocacy efforts in an effort to make Omaha an even better city, render it more attractive to residents and outsiders alike, and improve the quality of life for all community members. To support these efforts, the Young Professionals conducted two large-scale surveys over the past five years and held well over a dozen community-based roundtable discussions, all of which were focused on what local young professionals would like to see in Omaha.

Throughout the course of our research, one issue has been consistently mentioned: public transportation. Omaha's young professionals frequently note their strong desire for a transit system that is efficient, accessible and reliable. They want to leave their cars at home when they go to work, a concert, a museum or the grocery store, and they believe that a system that incorporates and integrates all facets of transportation- including biking, walking and mass transit- is possible. The Young Professionals public policy committee began researching public transportation in Omaha in November 2008 with a focus on assessing the system and ascertaining its strengths and weaknesses as it pertains to the retention and

attraction of young talent. We set out to determine what was working, what wasn't, where there are opportunities and strengths, who were the major players shaping transportation options in Omaha and what limitations or obstacles existed. We spoke with transit specialists throughout Omaha and obtained a wealth of great information about the history of transportation in Omaha. There remained a need, however, to delve further into the issue. In order to do so, the Challenge was created.

In creating the Challenge, our intent was twofold. First, we wanted to get people on the bus, plain and simple. Disparaging the system without ever actually using it was unacceptable in our view, so we challenged all local young professionals to use the system as much as possible during the three-week Challenge. Secondly, and more importantly, the Challenge served as an assessment tool. All participants were encouraged to provide feedback throughout the course of their experience via social media sites and in a post-Challenge survey. At a broader level, feedback was solicited from anyone interested in providing their perspective. Seeking feedback from both participants and non-participants was important to ensure that we adequately assessed the functionality of the bus system as well as the reasons cited concerning why individuals do not use MAT. There were many young professionals who wanted to participate in the Challenge, but felt they were unable to do so due to personal and occupational limitations. Including those unable to participate in the survey allowed us to obtain very important information from users and non-users alike.

We believe that a city with a highly effective and frequently used public transportation system is a more sustainable, economically sound, and healthier city that better serves the needs of all of its community members. We hope that this report is a foundational step toward a first-class public transportation system that completely reflects the potential, excitement and vibrancy of Omaha.

### **The YP Bus Challenge**

The YP Bus Challenge was announced in early March 2009. Using the Challenge Web site, YPBusChallenge.com, 174 participants formed 54 teams and registered for the Challenge. Participants logged each MAT bus trip taken from April 18 – May 9, 2009. Throughout the course of the Challenge, participants were incented to ride through give-aways and promotions. Teams were scored based on the average number of trips per team member, and the top three scoring teams received prizes. Throughout the course of the Challenge, 40 teams logged a total of 1,680 trips. In addition, 14 teams, made up of 38 individuals signed up to participate but never logged a trip.

### **Survey Methodology and Results**

Following the completion of the Challenge, participants were invited to complete a 42-question survey concerning their experiences on Omaha's bus system during the Challenge. Organizers also invited people who wanted to take the Challenge, but were unable to participate to take the survey.

For the three weeks following the Challenge, the survey was available online and publicized through the Young Professionals Web site, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other social networking sites. Three hundred and eight people took the survey, all of whom reside in the Omaha metropolitan area. Additional qualitative feedback was gathered from the survey, two forum discussions held on May 19, participants' e-mails to the Challenge's e-mail account and comments on Twitter. These qualitative, anecdotal responses totaled over 1,000 responses from young professionals concerning the City's bus system.

The survey respondents demographically reflect the Young Professionals population in Omaha with regard to age: nearly 60 percent of respondents were between 23 and 35 years old. Forty percent live in Midtown and 78 percent have at least a Bachelor's degree. One quarter of respondents report using Omaha's bus system as a "usual mode of transportation," while 94 percent own a personal automobile. Ninety two percent of those surveyed believe that improving mass transit is an important focus for young professionals in Omaha and should remain a priority for the organization. Further, it was clear that survey

participants generally believe in the societal benefits of public transportation and are therefore more likely to use the system, though not because of any inherent qualities of MAT.

## **Findings**

### *Who is riding the bus*

Interestingly, because of the heavy overlap between respondents who own a car and also use the bus system as a usual mode of transportation, it can be inferred that young professionals are taking the bus by choice – not by necessity. Just over one-third of respondents expect to ride the bus at least once or twice per week. Of those who report they are likely to continue using the bus system in the future, most are younger than 35 (58 percent) and reside in Midtown (49 percent). A slight majority of respondents who are most likely to take the bus in the future are female (53 percent). Only one percent of respondents living in Midtown reported that they would never ride the bus again compared to 55 percent of respondents in west Omaha.

Of those respondents who participated in the Challenge, almost two-thirds expect to ride the bus at least once or twice per week or more in the future. Additionally, 11 percent of respondents reported using the bike racks during the Challenge and were more likely than other responders to predict they would ride the bus after the Challenge.

### *Who is not riding the bus*

Reasons individuals offered for not taking the bus in the future varied by gender, age, educational attainment and income. Respondents who do not ride the bus because the schedule and routes are too complicated are more likely to be female (61 percent), earn less than \$50,000 (67 percent), and have less education than a bachelor's degree (59 percent). Most of the respondents who do not ride the bus because the schedule is inconvenient are younger than 30 (54 percent) and have a bachelor's degree or less education (66 percent). Respondents who reported that they do not ride the bus because they prefer their car are more likely to be male (65 percent) and earn an income higher than \$50,000 (52 percent). Respondents who do not ride the bus because they cannot find service where they need it are likely to earn less than \$50,000 (65 percent) and have a bachelor's degree or less education (66 percent).

### *Issues cited concerning ridership*

Of the 47 percent of all respondents who expect to ride the bus rarely or less in the future, 54 percent reported that the schedule is inconvenient, 47 percent reported a lack of service, 42 percent reported the system is too slow, 33 percent prefer to use personal vehicles, and 32 percent indicated the routes are too difficult to understand. Less common were responses that the bus system is not clean (7 percent), is not safe (6 percent) or is too expensive (4 percent). Seventy percent of respondents reported they would use Park and Ride if there were a convenient location near their point of origin. Half of all respondents would recommend using MAT to others, while 20 percent would not.

Anecdotal feedback from the survey was comprised of over 1,000 responses and revealed a number of aspects not captured by the survey. The comments were generally grouped by category and included:

- It was not clear that the price of gasoline rising to \$3 would be an effective motivator for increased bus usage.
- Most respondents reported satisfaction on the timeliness of buses, although it was widely noted that buses are more likely to be late in the afternoon. Further, riders felt that if the bus is early, it should wait at the bus stop until it is scheduled to depart.
- Participants suggested that MAT consider coordinating with UNO and Creighton University's evening schedules so that students in night classes can use the bus system. It was noted that Route 2 along Dodge Street stops at UNO 5-10 minutes before evening classes are finished and doesn't run again for up to 40 minutes.
- It was widely held that access to route maps is not good, and that the Web site and Trip Planner are not intuitive or user-friendly. Many respondents indicated that maps showing the direction of routes should be posted at bus stops, along with route numbers servicing the stop.
- It was commonly stated that the appearance of buses and bus stops, overall usability, convenience, and phone-based customer service needs to improve.

### *What MAT is doing well*

It was apparent from the anecdotal feedback that respondents seem generally satisfied with the availability of bus stops. Existing Park and Ride locations were well-received, with many respondents reporting a desire to see more locations added because of their success. While some respondents were not aware of the availability of bike racks on MAT buses, most were aware and appreciative of the opportunity to combine forms of transportation. Nearly unanimous were responses praising the friendliness of bus drivers, and many riders left specific feedback concerning positive interactions with them. Finally, it was clear that young professionals appreciate the system because of its inherent benefits to the city and the possibilities it offers riders to be more environmentally friendly.

## **Recommendations**

### **Partnerships**

**MAT should work with employers to promote employee stipends for public transportation and effectively communicate the availability of such subsidies.** Of those surveyed following the Challenge, 63 percent of respondents said their employers did not offer stipends or subsidies for use of public transportation. We recommend that MAT build relationships with employers in the Omaha area, particularly those in the downtown area that are already providing parking subsidies for their employees. These companies are in a position to save money that might otherwise be spent on parking, employees will have an incentive to use MAT even if automobiles are an option for them, and MAT can increase ridership in the process. Benefits exist for all parties involved, but only if such subsidies are effectively communicated to employees. Of those surveyed following the Challenge, 22 percent said they did not know whether their employees offered subsidies or stipends for public transportation. We recommend that MAT not only take the lead in encouraging such programs but continuously follow up to ensure that employees are learning of the public transportation stipends available to them through both corporate communications and MAT's own marketing efforts.

**MAT should develop strategic relationships with the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), Creighton University, and Metro Community College and market specifically to the student population.** Centrally located along the city's busiest corridor, UNO is a campus of individuals who fit the profile of the potential MAT rider (as indicated by the Challenge survey): young, Midtown/UNO area residents with a bachelor's degree or less, earning less than \$50,000 a year. Our research leads us to believe there is potential for a vibrant relationship between UNO and MAT that could benefit both institutions and improve the position and standing of public transportation in Omaha. The "Frequently Asked Questions" section of UNO's "GreenUN Sustainability" web page mentions that "discussions have been ongoing with Metro Area Transit to establish a pick-up and drop-off site on each campus location." We recommend that MAT aggressively pursue a stronger strategic partnership with UNO that includes more targeted and visible service to and from the campus.

Currently, UNO leases parking at Crossroads Mall and shuttles riders to and from the campus. This appears to be a patchwork solution to UNO's parking problems and an unsustainable one given the likelihood of new ownership and/or redevelopment at the Crossroads site. In the short term, MAT might consider competing for this service (adding a new revenue stream in the process) and position itself for a broader strategic relationship that would promote ridership among a population that has indicated an interest in public transportation.

We also see tremendous benefit to MAT developing strategic relationships with Creighton University and Metro Community College both have campus that are located off of major bus routes and serve populations that are more inclined to ride.

### **Funding**

**MAT and city leaders should aggressively pursue new funding for public transportation in the Omaha.** We believe that MAT should engage in conversations with community leaders and civic organizations regarding transportation planning and funding for the metropolitan area. While we do not seek to underestimate the challenge of procuring funding, we recommend an aggressive push for funding where transportation is considered on the city, county, state and federal levels. Essential to this effort will be educating the public about the various benefits of a strong public transportation system, including its potential to drive economic development, and the cost-effectiveness of funding public transportation.

### **Image and Web site**

**MAT should enhance its image through rebranding and by partnering with other organizations to expand the support for a strong public transportation system, with a focus on breaking existing stereotypes and stigmas attached to MAT riders.** Our transit system needs an identity that appeals to both existing customers and the discretionary rider. We recommend that MAT consider engaging a firm to re-evaluate the brand of Metro Area Transit. MAT should work with the firm to evaluate the effectiveness (and consider potential redesign) of every element of how MAT interacts with the public, from logo to signage, maps to Web site, advertising to bus graphics. Partnering with other organizations will allow MAT to expand the support for a strong city public transportation, diversify and increase bus ridership, and help remove negative stigmas associated with bus riding. Young professionals and student groups at Creighton University, Metro Community College and UNO are prime candidates for becoming consistent riders. These populations also see the benefit to the environment of reducing the number of individual car trips.

**MAT should further utilize technology and social media to strengthen its communication with riders and to attract and retain ridership.** Technology is an expected component of current and future generations of young professionals. Social media and internet technologies are often inexpensive, effective ways to reach a mass audience. First, we recommend that MAT continue pursuing an upload of its schedule to Google Transit ([Google.com/Transit](http://Google.com/Transit)). As an established transit tracking system, Google Transit offers MAT the ability to take advantage of technology that is currently serving over 400 transit authorities worldwide via web and mobile phone browser. Using Google Transit would also allow MAT to discontinue its use of the Trip Planner feature, which did not score well with users.

Second, we recommend that MAT consider using specific social media Web sites such as Twitter to communicate with riders in real-time. This is a free service to users, and if patterned after San Francisco's successful implementation, will allow riders and potential riders to know about possible delays, conditions and route changes.

In the long-term, we recommend incorporating wireless internet technology into new buses and transfer hubs. This allows riders to use the internet while traveling and presents a prime opportunity to encourage commuters to become riders by taking advantage of a service not available to those who commute by car.

### **Bus Route and Schedule Enhancements**

**MAT should consider changes to scheduling and route network.** One of the most frequent criticisms of the MAT system was that the routes and schedules were simply not convenient. Many bus riders and potential bus riders found that driving was not only quicker, but allowed them more flexibility with their

daily schedules. Another related concern was the frequency of stops made along certain routes, which clearly increases overall trip time. Survey respondents indicated that a stop every block seems far too frequent. As mentioned above, of the 47 percent of all respondents who expect to ride the bus rarely or less in the future, 54 percent reported that the schedule is inconvenient, 47 percent reported a lack of service, 42 percent reported the system is too slow.

Since routes are playing such a large factor in determining ridership, MAT should work with the general public and other agencies, such as Metropolitan Area Planning Agency, to consider changing part or the entire bus network. Adding more routes would be a clear opportunity for improvement; however, we would encourage MAT to take into consideration overall existing usage, and the possibility of moving, adding or even eliminating routes to ensure efficiency of the entire system.

Since adding multiple routes to low-density areas (i.e. west Omaha) is most likely not economical, consideration should be given to adding more Park-and-Ride and Express Route options there. Focus additional routes around higher density areas, since public transit is most effective in those regions.

MAT could also consider lengthening schedules to accommodate less-structured or less conventional work times (i.e., for those who only work nights). Late night service on the weekends to serve those leaving bars and entertainment areas was another common suggestion from Challenge participants and should also be evaluated.

In conjunction with an update to MAT's image, bus stops and signage need an upgrade. There was an overwhelming amount of confusion for new riders since bus route numbers are currently not listed on bus stop signs, and the Trip Planner on the MAT Web site does not always indicate exactly where the correct bus stop is located. New signage which clearly shows bus numbers is a must. MAT could also consider inexpensive, but attractive bus shelters to protect riders from being exposed to the elements, as well as from somewhat dangerous street corners.

### **Community Call to Action:**

#### **Short-term actions:**

- MAT should continue to value quality of service as the highest priority. To obtain the highest level of satisfaction, we recommend simplifying the system even if it means doing less to do it better. If an area of the city does not support sufficient riders, routes should be reduced to improve the frequency of popular routes. This approach should also be applied to popular times of the day.
- All organizations and residents should prioritize proximity to public transportation when considering where to locate operations or residences. This coordination should not be done as an afterthought or by creating a new route after construction has begun.
- Greater Omaha should consider developing a transportation master plan that is not limited to the expansion of roads. The study must evaluate growth patterns and look for ways to make both community growth and public transportation successful.
- The goal of reducing car trips for all residents is both an individual financial benefit and a collective environmental benefit. It is the responsibility of the individual, the government and the private business sector to focus resources on promoting public and alternative forms of transportation to the residents of Omaha.

#### **Long-term actions:**

- A substantial number of issues highlighted in the Challenge by participants relate to frequency of bus service and convenience to points of origin and destination. As the City of Omaha grows outward with ever decreasing densities, these issues relating to service will only increase. MAT

must either re-invent its service offerings and the public's expectations for those services, or the policies that shape how Omaha grows in the future must be adjusted to allow for functional public transportation. For public transportation to be successful in expanding growth areas, the current trend in suburban development towards lower density must be reversed. The City and/or county should consider a transit/urban growth boundary or substantially increase the regulation of suburban development to meet higher density requirements for public transportation.

- If a functional public transportation system remains a long term goal for Omaha, the region must establish policies which reward residents and businesses that relocate or build adjacent to existing public transportation infrastructure. Infill development must be required to provide housing and employment density to ensure transportation success. Areas within the core city should be identified and benefit from financial incentives for new construction that utilizes existing infrastructure.
- Transportation policy and funding must increase the focus on public transportation, reducing the emphasis on new road construction and existing road expansion.
- Agencies responsible for developing economic growth must insure that all policies relating to the built environment encourage growth that is in concert with the public transportation master plan.

### **Conclusion**

The Challenge provided a rich opportunity to gather meaningful feedback from Challenge participants and others about the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement of the City's bus system. It is the Young Professionals hope that MAT, city leaders, young professionals and other community members can work together to enhance our bus system and, in doing so, strengthen our community and bolster our ability to attract and retain talented young professionals.