

ISTEA: Making a Difference in the Southeast

Joe DiStefano and Matthew Raimi

These short pieces are excerpted from Five Years of Progress: 110 Communities Where ISTEA is Making a Difference, by Joe DiStefano and Matthew Raimi. While the book includes cases from across the United States, we have chosen ones from the Southeast. Even this limited selection illustrates the wide range of innovative uses planners have found for funds allocated through the Intermodal Surface Transportation Act (ISTEA). The entire text is available at <http://www.transact.org> or the book can be purchased by calling the Surface Transportation Policy Project at (202) 466-2636.

ISTEA offers a vision for a national transportation system aimed at improving the quality of life in our cities, towns, and communities. It recognizes that transportation investments must be made from the standpoint of people and communities, and hundreds of projects have been funded with this goal in mind. By emphasizing intermodalism, local decision making, public input, environmental quality, and transportation alternatives, ISTEA recognizes the importance of transportation in the fulfillment of national and local social, economic, and environmental goals.

Natchez Visitor and Intermodal Center: Natchez, Mississippi

Background

The historic town of Natchez, Mississippi has flourished as a tourist destination since the 1980s. However, such economic vitality has also proved to be a burden on the city's aging infrastructure due to increased vehicle traffic and parking demands. In order to deal with and coordinate economic growth,

the City of Natchez received \$3.5 million in ISTEA funds to build the Natchez Visitor Reception and Intermodal Transportation Center (VRITC). The Intermodal facility will serve as the focal point and "first stop" for all visitors entering Natchez, and will be the key to getting visitors out of their cars and onto city trolleys, buses, and their feet to explore the district. In addition to serving as an Intermodal facility, a goal of the VRITC is to make visitors aware of the context in which Natchez developed and the facilities the city now offers. According to city engineer David Gardner, each area contains footprints of the past; the purpose of the visitor center will be "to make these footprints visible and understandable." This will be achieved through a 22-minute video that provides a glimpse into the past, and with computerized kiosks which will allow visitors to work out their own itineraries and access restaurants, lodgings and attractions.

One of the unique aspects of the VRITC is the partnership which developed in the creation of the facility. The Natchez center is a cooperative effort of the City of Natchez, the State of Mississippi, the Federal Highway Administration, and the National Park Service, with each agency sharing in the overall cost of the construction and maintenance of the facility. Perhaps the most unique aspect of the partnership is the inclusion of the National Park Service. The creation of the Natchez National Historic Park allowed the Park Service to contribute to the overall cost of the project in exchange for housing the

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National Park Service administrative headquarters.

Transportation Benefits

The visitor center will be strategically located to collect incoming visitors at one central point, provide them with information on Natchez, and facilitate access to the historical area by trolleys, buses, and by foot. This Intermodal network will control vehicular traffic, provide a safer, less intrusive means of transporting visitors, and boost ridership on the trolley and bus system.

Economic Impacts

The VRITC will bring numerous economic benefits to Natchez. Businesses in the historic downtown will benefit from coordinated marketing actions and increased activity. In addition, the VRITC will require a minimal amount of support from the City of Natchez, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the National Park Service. The operating expenses come from admission fees to a historical video presentation, sales from a gift shop, and potential evening rentals of the space.

Community Benefits

The center is located in close proximity to the historic district and is highly accessible to most visitors. The location of the facility on the edge of downtown allows the area to benefit from the VRITC development and the arrival of new visitors, while at the same time maintaining a healthy distance in order to preserve the balance between the growth of tourism and the preservation of historic Natchez. The City of Natchez will receive the economic benefits of expanded tourism without the negative consequences that such growth can bring.

Tampa-Ybor Historic Electric Streetcar: Tampa, Florida

Background

Ybor City, a district of Tampa, Florida, is constructing a historic streetcar line to enhance economic development and provide an alternative mode of transportation to the automobile. To facilitate the construction of the 2.3-mile line, Ybor City was awarded a Livable Communities Initiative Demonstration Grant by the Federal Transit Admin-

istration in April of 1996. The line will run through Ybor, a classic urban village which has shown signs of revitalization in recent years and was designated as an Enterprise Community by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The electric streetcar, along with pedestrian enhancements, will assist in the revitalization efforts as well as provide a new and economical way of moving between various destinations. The streetcar will run between Downtown Ybor and the Tampa Convention Center and will connect most of the residential, commercial, community, and public service activities in this ethnically diverse and historic area. Destinations along the line include historic Ybor, cruise ship terminals, retail shops along Garrison Channel, the Ice Palace (hockey arena), the Sheraton Hotel, the Florida Aquarium, and the Tampa Convention Center. Construction of the streetcar, a source of community pride, will benefit the local economy.

Transportation Benefits

The streetcar will provide improved connections between trip attractions in the Ybor City district and will alleviate pressure for parking thus reducing traffic congestion in the historic district. The electric cars will make more frequent stops, and operate longer hours, with lower costs, than the existing bus system; transit ridership is expected to increase. The clean electric cars will help Tampa maintain its recent Clean Air Act designation as an air quality maintenance area. (That is, the U.S. EPA recently determined that Tampa's air quality has improved to the point where it is in attainment with national air quality standards.)

Economic Impacts

The historic district of Ybor City and the waterfront area in Downtown Tampa are home to much housing and employment, and is an emerging art, entertainment, and convention district. Construction of the streetcar will make the area more attractive as a tourist destination and increase the national appeal of the Tampa Convention Center. This will increase economic opportunities for individuals and businesses, and assist in the revitalization of Ybor City and downtown Tampa.

Community Benefits

The streetcar will provide improved transit service, thus increasing mobility and accessibility for

residents and visitors, particularly to low income and minority populations present along, and in proximity to, the streetcar line. A streetcar in Ybor City will be a source of community pride and a magnet for economic investment. Coupled with Ybor's designation as an Enterprise Community, economic opportunities are expected to increase and the streetcars will provide residents with a more livable environment.

Public Participation

The electric streetcar is unlike many transportation projects in that it was conceived by the community, rather than a governing body or independent agency. The project evolved in response to recommendations by the Tampa Enterprise Community Vision, which called for improved transportation by various modes and a renewal of the economic base of the area. The Community Vision was developed through a series of community meetings organized by residents and by working closely with business leaders, service providers, and government officials. Local architects, engineers, historians, and community residents volunteered their time and services to develop the project plan.

East River Mountain Overlook: Bluefield, West Virginia

Bluefield, West Virginia used ISTEA funds to restore a once vital scenic overlook located on East River Mountain. The site, 3,500 feet above sea level, affords views of the town and the Central Appalachian Mountain Range, and was a major tourist attraction until 1970 when Interstate 77 opened and pulled traffic and tourism away from the area. ISTEA Transportation Enhancements funds were used to redesign and revitalize the abandoned overlook and to restore the scenic vistas which had become overrun with vegetation. Funds were used to redesign the traffic flow of the site, establish unobstructed views for people on foot and in cars, upgrade the site for handicapped accessibility, and build a picnic area.

Hilton Village Streetscape improvement: Newport News, Virginia

ISTEA Transportation Enhancements funds are being utilized for streetscape and access improvement in Newport News' Historic Hilton Village. Developed in 1918 as the country's first World War I shipyard housing project, Hilton Village is listed on the

National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register. This project addresses the deterioration of public streets, provides handicapped accessibility, improves pedestrian circulation and safety, and improves the visual quality of the district. The project will increase pedestrian access for all people, especially those with special needs, while revitalizing the historic commercial district as a focal point of the area. In completing the project, the city worked with state and local non-profit agencies and local lending institutions to establish a low interest loan program to help fund building renovation in the area. Further, by enhancing the quality of the downtown area, the streetscape improvements lay the foundation for future Intermodal connections between a proposed transit station and facilities for bicycles and buses.

Georgia Tech to Stone Mountain Park Trail

Background

As home of the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, the City of Atlanta, Georgia integrated its bicycle and pedestrian efforts into its Olympic transportation planning efforts as a means of promoting alternative forms of transportation during the summer games, and into the future. Projects include inner-city pedestrian corridors, the addition of sidewalk and bicycle facilities in conjunction with local road improvements, and the 18-mile Georgia Tech to Stone Mountain Park Trail. The trail connects the Olympic venues at Georgia Tech to the venues at Stone Mountain Park, a number of parks, and several tourist attractions along the way. During the Olympics, the trail connected with a temporary bicycle route designed to serve Olympic spectators who bicycled to Olympic events.

Transportation Benefits

Beyond its significance to Atlanta's Olympic effort, the Georgia Tech to Stone Mountain Park Trail also serves as an east-west trunk line for the development of a comprehensive bicycle-pedestrian system for the Atlanta region. Several adjoining routes already provide connections to downtown Atlanta, MARTA rail stations, schools, universities, and other points of interest and activity centers. The trail is an integral part of the Atlanta Region Bicycle Transportation and Pedestrian Walkways Plan, which has programmed approximately \$84 million in ISTEA

and other funds through fiscal year 1999 for bicycle and pedestrian projects.

Community Benefits

The Georgia Tech to Stone Mountain Park Trail provides more transportation options, not only for daily commutes, but also for short trips. Commuters using the trail and the larger bike and pedestrian system help to alleviate congestion, reduce harmful auto emissions. Trail users also reduce stress associated with sitting in traffic, and even receive some valuable exercise as part of their daily commute.

West Orange Trail: Orange County, Florida

Background

Orange County, in Central Florida, is joining communities nationwide in improving quality of life and transportation options by creating multi-use trails. The new West Orange Trail will be a 26 mile, multi-purpose greenway, including a 14 foot wide paved surface for walkers, joggers, hikers, cyclists, skaters, horseback riders, and the physically challenged. In mid-1996, 5.2 miles of the trail were open, with another 14 miles to open in 1997. Made possible by the strong support and leadership of Orange County officials, the West Orange Trail project is converting an abandoned railroad line and connecting the cities of Winter Garden, Oakland, Ocoee, and Apopka. Facilities include scenic overlooks, parking areas, restrooms, water fountains, trash cans, pay phones, and air machines to inflate tires.

Transportation Benefits

Transportation Enhancements Funds are supporting the development of the trail, which serves both the alternative transportation and recreational needs of three communities. The trail links local residents and visitors to two town halls, a utility company, post office, employers, neighborhoods, and retail developments. The trail has been very well received.

Economic Impacts

Once a thriving citrus and railroad town, downtown Winter Garden has lost much of its economic base over the years. The West Orange Trail is revitalizing the town by attracting visitors to several

restaurants, antique shops, and other establishments. Other areas along the trail are benefiting as well. Jim Hitt, Economic Development Coordinator for the City of Apopka, notes that "The West Orange Trail will work for Apopka. . . [it] will bring people from the southern ends of the trail into Apopka. This will mean new opportunities for existing businesses and new entrepreneurs. We all benefit when rail-trails are built and put to use from one community to another."

Community Benefits

Since its opening, the trail has averaged approximately 38,000 users per month. Michele Russo of the Trail Patrol notes that "Attendance is booming...people are out here every weekend. Many local residents are out here every day." Brook Seal, Trail Supervisor, adds that "people who were once afraid because of traffic are taking up new activities." Trail usage is expected to double or triple as construction is completed. The trail has created a vital link between the communities it serves, tightening the connection between communities and bringing people closer together.

Sustainable Community Planning: Kansas City, Missouri

The Metropolitan Energy Center, a non-profit transportation and energy agency, is working with residents in several Kansas City neighborhoods to develop sustainable community planning. With grants from the Federal Transit Administration's Community Empowerment Program, the Energy Center works with urban neighborhoods to get residents involved in planning and decision making in their communities. Sustainable community planning is taking place in two older middle income neighborhoods, and two low-income, predominantly minority inner-city neighborhoods. The most important aspect of community planning is strong neighborhood participation. At neighborhood meetings, the residents participate in planning activities, including a visioning process, a prioritization of the results of the visioning process, research and information gathering by various outside sources including the Energy Center, and hands-on planning. The result is a clearer idea of what the residents want for the future of their community. Once completed, a key element to maintaining community interest is an early planning success; in one neighborhood this involved a simple traffic calming

project. Thus far, sustainable community planning has been effective in involving citizens in the planning process. By connecting the physical, social, and natural environments of the neighborhood, sustainable community planning helps residents identify and plan for a strong and secure future. In addition, a neighborhood with a clear vision (and one designed by residents) has a greater chance of acquiring needed programs while defending against unwanted development.

Police Substation and Daycare Facility: Reistertown, Maryland

Through [the Federal Transportation Administration's] Livable Communities Initiative, the City of Baltimore will construct a 100-child day care facility and a police substation at the Reistertown Road Plaza Metro subway station, one of Baltimore's busiest subway stations. This project will provide mixed-use development to support and encourage transit ridership, while providing community services to the surrounding neighborhood. To integrate these new facilities with the transit station, the project will include security lighting, site and landscape renovations, kiss-and-ride modifications, customer information, and covered connecting walkways. According to Maryland Governor Parris Glendening, the "grant is an important part of our efforts to revitalize Baltimore communities. . . . The construction of this day care facility will encourage the use of mass transit by offering additional services to potential riders—we also create safer communities with the addition of the police substation."

Ride Instead of Drive, It's Easy (RIDE): Nashville, Tennessee

The Middle Tennessee Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) has implemented a regional ridesharing program which has successfully removed single-occupant vehicles from the road and reduced congestion and air pollution. The RIDE program includes ride matching for those who wish to join a carpool or vanpool, financial incentives for starting vanpools, and a guaranteed ride home program for commuters who have to stay at work late or leave early in case of an emergency. The program also includes 12 free park-and-ride lots, a high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane on a local interstate (I-65), and continuously expanding transit service in the area. ISTEA [Congestion Management and Air Quality]

funds were provided to RTA for marketing and outreach activities, and for supplementing the van fleet for the HOV corridor.

Clean Air Action: Houston, Texas

Background

Like many urban areas across the country, the Houston-Galveston region of Texas suffers from poor air quality. The Environmental Protection Agency requires that these regions, known as nonattainment areas, take steps to reduce air pollution. In the past, these measures have focused on large industries, such as factories, and small businesses, such as dry cleaners. Houston expanded the focus of pollution reduction activities to include individuals, creating the Clean Air Action Program. Clean Air Action, developed in 1996 by the Regional Air Quality Planning Committee of the Houston-Galveston Area Council, consists of three separate but related activities: a comprehensive public education program that encourages the use of transit or ridesharing on high ozone-level days; a transit fare subsidy program on high ozone days to begin in August of 1997; and a marketing research element that evaluates the project and quantifies the emissions reductions from the program.

One of the main goals of the program is informing the public about days when ozone levels are predicted to be high, known as "ozone watch" days. The Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission provides the City of Houston with ozone watch advisories. The City in turn notifies the media and other groups through a fax network system. If an actual ozone exceedance occurs, an ozone warning is issued and individuals are encouraged to take steps to reduce air pollution, such as taking transit or carpooling, combining errands into one trip, or even postponing a trip until a day with improved air quality. In addition, a transit fare subsidy program will begin in 1997 and provide an economic incentive for individuals to use transit on ozone watch days.

Transportation Benefits

Mobile sources, such as cars and trucks, are one of the primary sources of volatile organic compound and nitrogen oxide—the precursors of ozone. Educating the public on the health and air quality benefits of carpooling, combining trips, and driving

less will lead to a reduction in the emission of air pollutants. Having fewer cars on the road also reduces traffic congestion.

Community Benefits

Community benefits from the Clean Air Action program are wide-ranging. The public is educated on the effects on human health of poor air quality, informed of measures to reduce the emissions of pollution, and told when exposure to ozone may cause health problems—especially to the elderly and the young. As a result of the program, the public is equipped with the knowledge necessary to assist in reducing air pollution and traffic congestion.

Advanced Transportation Management System: Atlanta, Georgia

Background

In response to overwhelming population growth, rising construction costs and land prices, deteriorating air quality, and decreasing funds, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) has created an Advanced Transportation Management System (ATMS) to handle the Atlanta area's disparate transportation needs. The system integrates the management of freeways and surface roads, allows state and local engineers to participate and interact in up-to-the-minute transportation decisions, provides a high speed/high capacity communications network, and serves as a clearinghouse for public information.

The ATMS is designed to gather information from a variety of sources, including an advance surveillance system, Highway Emergency Response Operators (HEROs), and the public. The system then processes that information using geographical software, and displays it to decision makers. Once a decision is made and action is taken to alleviate a situation or problem, the ATMS checks the outcome and then disseminates the information through the Advanced Traveler Information System (ATIS).

The ATIS provides timely information to travelers, allowing them to make efficient and timesaving transportation decisions. Components of the ATIS include:

- **Changeable Message Signs:** overhead message structures which provide timely traffic information on incident locations and lane closures

- **Traffic Advisory Telephone System:** provides targeted information requested by the caller about traffic conditions
- **Electronic Kiosks:** touch-screen displays which give up-to-the-minute information on traffic congestion, transit schedules, ridesharing, special events, weather, airline schedules, special events such as the Olympics, and tourist information
- **Highway Advisory Radio:** while driving through a specific zone, motorists can tune their radios to receive real-time information about traffic patterns within the area
- **Bulletin Board System:** personal computer users can obtain textual messages with real-time status of traffic and transit conditions

Transportation Benefits

Timely and accurate transmission of information is the central point of the Advanced Transportation Management System. Transportation data, including vehicle classification, highway occupancy, and areas of incidents and congestion, flow from highway surveillance devices through a fiber optic network strategically placed along 63 miles of major Interstates and over 125 miles of primary roads.

To help traffic move more smoothly on streets, more than 400 intersections with traffic signals have been upgraded. This upgrade coordinates signals within Atlanta and its five surrounding counties, allowing better coordination across jurisdictions and a reduction in travel time for motorists. Several ramp meters have been installed to regulate vehicle flow on crowded freeways, reducing merging accidents and ramp area congestion.

Incident verification and accident clearance is a prime function of the ATMS. Because the surveillance system provides real-time images, operators are able to verify accidents, which reduces response time, speeds up removal of incidents, and minimizes congestion. Surveillance and video detection devices are installed on Interstates 75 and 85 and include 63 closed-circuit color TV cameras. More than 300 cameras are used to detect and gather information on volume, speed, occupancy, and vehicle classification. A gyroscopic camera mounted on a helicopter is used for aerial surveillance, providing live video within a 50-mile range, vastly increasing the area of coverage. 