Ozaukee County Express

Summary:

The Ozaukee County Express provides transit service to and from places in Ozaukee County and Milwaukee county. It is used for commuters into the city and for reverse commuters from the inner city of Milwaukee to job sites in suburban locations. It began service on August 5, 1996, and continues to serve more than 6000 passengers annually. In 1994, Ozaukee County, a severe ozone non-attainment area, was faced with Employee Commute Option/Clean Air mandates. In addition, Ozaukee County employers were in desperate need for a larger labor pool and pushed for a transportation system in Ozaukee County. Originally called the Ozaukee Express Bus Service, the Ozaukee County Express is currently run by the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS).

Description:

Ozaukee County was considered a severe ozone non-attainment area, and in 1994 employers in Ozaukee County faced Employee Commute Option (ECO)/Clean Air mandates. In addition, due to low unemployment rate and a high cost of housing in Ozaukee County, many employers were having difficulty finding employees to fill vacant positions. Because of these needs, the Ozaukee County Economic Development Corporation (OCEDC, non-profit 501(c)(6) organization) applied to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation for a Transportation Demand Management (TDM) grant to form a countywide Transportation Management Association (TMA). The purpose of the Ozaukee County TMA (OCTMA) was to plan and implement new commuter transit in Ozaukee County. As the director of the Ozaukee County TMA, Ms. Kit Keller spearheaded the project to establish a transit system in Ozaukee County.

A bus system made good business sense for many communities in Ozaukee County. Homegrown industries needed workers. Without workers, such industries would be forced to move out of the county, which would negatively impact the community’s and the county’s tax base. Responding to the parallel efforts of the county and OCEDC, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) conducted a transit study.

Ozaukee County examined other transit and employee shuttle systems in the region, notably New Berin’s. But the impetus to design and start a transit system in Ozaukee County resulted from a multiple of people’s ideas, both private and public. Ozaukee County used SEWRPC’s transit service report 96-00 as a reference.
In the beginning, the Ozaukee Express served Milwaukee to County V to Hwy 32, and then to feeder communities. Shuttle buses met express buses at the lots to take passengers to employment sites in six communities in Ozaukee County. Transit service was available on all three work shifts in Ozaukee County. The park and ride lots along I-43 in southern part of the county became stops along the rapid transit bus route between Ozaukee and Milwaukee counties. The transit system grew from six to twelve round trips per day between Milwaukee’s near south side and park-and-ride lots in Ozaukee County. It continued to expand with fixed routes, which were demand responsive.

The Ozaukee County Express was successful because it had a public-private partnership approach, a flexible and customer-come-first approach to public transit, and energetic support by business owners in a politically and fiscally conservative county.

During the first month of service in August 1996, Ozaukee Express operated Monday through Friday for a total of 20 days of service. During the first month 1,122 one-way trips (trips between Milwaukee and Ozaukee Counties) were made. The cost to operate all vehicles on all Ozaukee Express routes for August was $37,130. A total of $2,503.63 in passenger fares was collected during the 20 days of operation in August 1996. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation directed Ozaukee Express to waive fares for the first two weeks for former Job Ride riders, if requested. Thus, the passenger fares collected during the month of August 1996 were lower than expected.

Currently, the Ozaukee County Express provides services to Mitchell Street, Downtown Milwaukee, Cedarburg, Fredonia, Grafton, Mequon, Port Washington, and Saukville.

User Assessment

Customers:

In 1995 96% of Ozaukee county residents had access to vehicles. According to the 1990 census, 700 households were without access to transportation. Because the employers in Ozaukee County agreed to pay for the full local share during the first 17 months of the project, the Ozaukee County Board of Supervisors readily agreed to be the public sponsor that would apply for the public funding. On behalf of the county, the OCTMA prepared all funding applications. The CMAQ grant provided for three years of funding. In effect, the county board received an offer that it couldn’t refuse because CMAQ paid for the majority of project costs during the pilot years.

Agency:
The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) had just passed in 1991, and had embraced the public participation model. A federal mandate of employee commute options (ECO), required that companies with 15 employees or more should have 1.4 persons per vehicle, and not have everyone drive to work. That requirement brought employers also strapped for workers to the table for discussion on the possibility of starting a transit system in the county. The OCTMA was a project of OCEDC, and the OCEDC became the manager of the program and convener of the meetings.

Ms. Linda Lovejoy from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) transit department, Ms. Sue Hill and Mr. Dixon Nuber, administrators for the TDM grant program, and Mr. Marshall Quade of DOT District 2 were involved with the program. Marshall Quade helped to get funding for additional service during the time of road construction on I-43, which included bus shelters at each of the park-and–ride lots. Ms. Carol Schneider, CEO of SEEK Incorporated, was the visionary and the champion behind the project.

Only July 1, 1998, OCTMA transferred responsibility for operations of the Ozaukee Express to the county government.

**Technology Assessment:**

**Relative Benefits:**

Supporters of the program believed public transportation would bring to the county much needed workers as well as new freedom for those who didn't drive. The worker shortage in the county was a primary motivation to begin the service.

The advantages with an express bus are that it serves out of park-and-ride lots and has the highest speed service to downtown.

The disadvantages are that the riders need a way to get to the park-and-ride to get on the bus. However, Ozaukee County now offers a shared-ride taxi program to alleviate concerns about getting to and from the park-and-ride lots.

**Trial process:**

Because the county was trying to create something so different, it took a while to get the program going. A few people opposed the idea initially but over time even they became supporters. By January 25, 1996, Mequon was the only community not to endorse a
resolution for the 2-year pilot transportation project, projected to cost $425,000 annually. In February 1996, the state DOT approved a $360,000 grant to Ozaukee County under the CMAQ program. The program was supposed to have begun on January 1, 1996, but began on August 5, 1996.

When the first contract expired after five years of operation, the Milwaukee County Transit System successfully obtained the bid to operate the Ozaukee County Express.

**Observability:**

The ridership has been consistently above 6000 passengers since 1997. After the inception of the Ozaukee Express in August, the five months average in 1996 produced a ridership of 2518 passengers.

The success of the program was observed by looking at the ridership. In addition, a customer service survey was conducted.

The following table illustrates the ridership for the past seven years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ozaukee County Express Ridership 1996-2002</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>1997</td>
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<td>1998</td>
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<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Complexity:**

Initially, a majority of the 32-member county board showed support for some sort of public transportation in the county. Conflicts with the Mequon mayor kept the issue in the news. Because of the outside funding and the local share paid by the employers, Ozaukee County had few expenses. Opponents of the program eventually became supporters of the program.

The county had an obligation to provide services. The county’s attitude toward change was open but skeptical. All parties involved had to communicate effectively, and the OCTMA had to bring an offer the county could not refuse. Too often, County
government is an unknown governmental body except for its human services delivery. The Wisconsin DOT required the county to establish a transit committee, which the Administrative Committee did. Initially, three out of five members including the chairperson were not supportive of the program, but eventually became supporters.

During the planning process, OCTMA faced the following obstacles/hurdles: 1) red tape and time (from a business perspective, red tape is frustrating to the business community), and 2) did not have a strong flexible transit model.

The political obstacle of Mequon was turned into an advantage. Because of Mequon’s non-support of the program, the issue was kept in the news.

The key to success is to have a solid plan to work with and to turn hurdles into advantages.

Cost:

The transit program was funded through state and federal transit operating assistance, a Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) program grant, passenger revenues, and local share. The employers paid the local share during the first 17 months of the project. In 1998, employers agreed to pay 70% of the local share with the county paying for 30%. Ozaukee County originally contracted for transit service at flat hourly rates: $52 per hour for bus service and $32 per hour for shuttle van service.

During the pilot period, the program received $94,000 in state funds to plan and implement the transit service and $1 million in federal and state funds to offer 1996-98 transit services with a single county tax levy of only $40,000.

The operational costs for the five months of service in 1996 were $192,958, and expected to be more than $580,000 for twelve months of service in 1997. The total operation costs for the Ozaukee County Express for the past few years are shown in the following table:
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost per trip</td>
<td>10.23</td>
<td>10.72</td>
<td>8.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total operations</td>
<td>849,772</td>
<td>862,891</td>
<td>896,816</td>
<td>890,713*</td>
<td>906,279**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*budget  
**proposed and adopted budget

**Consequences of Failure:**

There were concerns about failure at every second of the planning process because it was the first of its kind and the agency had something to prove. There was a lot on the line. Some raised concerns that a bus service to and from Milwaukee County would bring an influx of crime frequently associated with metropolitan areas.

The goal of the transit system was to have the service work quickly, providing the shortest possible trip time from point A to B and from park-and-ride lots to businesses in the county. Had the transit system not worked out, residents and employees would have one less transportation option and the employers would continue to have had a shortage of employees to fill vacant positions due to lack of transportation access.

**Implementation Issues:**

County residents knew about the program through articles in the papers, from individual employers, and via word of mouth. County board members were kept apprised through the use of monthly, one page reports with key numbers highlighted in the margin for clarity and easy reference. Simple communication is the key.

Ms. Keller advises: form partnerships with everybody, develop good relationships with the media, get to know the DOT and political players, get to know the SEWRPC (Al Beck was great!), and “believe strongly” in a solidly designed, yet flexible plan. In addition, she advises: don’t take “no” for an answer, don’t look to existing models as the only option, and don’t assume that a “no” vote means lack of support.

In addition to the Ozaukee County Express project, Ms. Keller offered guidance to Washington County as they formulated their commuter bus program (shared-ride started first, then commuter service). She is currently working on a new statewide pedestrian advocacy group, Wisconsin Walks, to create more walkable neighborhoods. Wisconsin Walks received a $30,000 partnership project award from the National Center for Bicycling and Walking to create a new model.

Some of the accolades bestowed upon Ozaukee County include: Wisconsin Partner for Clean Air 1998 and Environmental Protection Agency’s Transportation Partners Award.
Out of all of the Transportation Demand Management Programs, Ozaukee was the most successful.

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