



More Public Transit Options and Public-Private Sector Collaboration Creates Better Access to Labor Pool for Industrial Park Employers

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ST. LOUIS - Record-setting growth in the St. Louis region's industrial sector in recent years resulted in strong demand for labor and the need for enhanced transportation options to connect a larger pool of employees to the thousands of jobs that have been added. Collaboration between the tenants in some of the largest industrial parks, the St. Louis Regional Freightway, Metro Transit, Madison County Transit, and municipalities such as Madison County, Ill., and Hazelwood, Mo., has resulted in those needs being met. The transit solutions put in place have proven resilient, even in the midst of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

While the specific needs vary for the individual industrial parks across the bi-state region, the solutions deployed in Madison County, Ill., - home to an industrial corridor known locally as Logistics Valley - reveal that when the right people are gathered around the table, collectively they are able to identify ways to better utilize the area's robust transit system.

For more than a decade, Madison County Transit (MCT) has been expanding its service in the warehouse district along Illinois Route 111, especially to the Gateway Commerce Center, where the workforce is a key contributor to the 9,500 warehouse employees in Edwardsville alone. In response to the growing demand, MCT introduced the 20X Gateway Commerce Express in May 2019, serving passengers connecting to MCT from the Emerson Park MetroLink Station to access the Gateway Commerce Center. The 20X has seen significant growth over the last 18 months and that growth continued even in the midst of the pandemic. To accommodate the continued rise in demand, several additional trips were added in the morning and afternoon, with the new trips producing an average ridership increase of 81% between May and October 2020.

The growth on the 20X route has been fueled by providing a direct, express route to the thriving industrial corridor from the Emerson Park MetroLink Station which is located in St. Clair County. MetroLink is the backbone of the region's transit system, spanning 46 miles in eastern Missouri and southwestern Illinois and giving a larger pool of potential employees on both sides of the Mississippi River enhanced access to solid employment opportunities.

“The Emerson Park MetroLink Station is uniquely positioned to serve the neighboring Madison County residents and workers who want convenient transportation,” said Ken Sharkey, Managing Director of the St. Clair County Transit District. “This promotes economic development and growth in our region.”

As demand for labor grew among major employers such as Amazon, World Wide Technology, Crescent, Hersey and others, staying up to speed on their evolving workforce needs was critical to ensuring a transit service model that delivered. Consider World Wide Technology, which recently signed one of the region's largest industrial lease agreements adding two-million square feet to its regional footprint and an estimated 1,500 additional jobs, and it becomes clear that reliable transit access to these major employment centers had to be a high priority.

"In her unique position as both head of the St. Louis Regional Freightway and a member of the leadership team at Bi-State Development which also operates Metro Transit, Mary Lamie helped set up key meetings to bring those familiar with the evolving workforce transportation needs to the table," said SJ Morrison, Managing Director of Madison County Transit. "A lot of valuable information came from those meetings which influenced how we continue to adapt our service to these employment centers."

Among the critical things learned was that shift change times at the industrial parks did not always align with the peak available service. One route that provided service to the busy industrial corridor had buses that left at 3:30 a.m. and they were overcrowded, even with three buses serving the route. Some individuals coming from Alton or Collinsville were having to take three or more different buses to reach the industrial parks, resulting in a commute that could last up to 90 minutes or even two hours in some cases. MCT decided they could do better.

Ultimately, the plan called for identifying three peak periods for the industrial parks, which turned out not to be same as normal commuter rush hours, and working to retrofit the bus service accordingly, adding services where there is the greatest demand and reducing it where there is little demand. Even during the COVID-19 global pandemic, demand for transportation to jobs within the Gateway Commerce Center has not declined.

In August 2020, MCT added two new express routes from the Alton and Collinsville areas directly serving the warehouses throughout Gateway Commerce Center. The new express service significantly reduced travel times for riders from those communities, making it possible to complete the one way trip in as little as 25 to 30 minutes in many cases. The new 24X express route from Alton and 25X express route from Collinsville have made modest ridership gains since their inception, even as the pandemic has raged on, as operations within many of the logistics related businesses continued or even accelerated. In all, between its express routes and shuttles to and through Gateway Commerce Center, each weekday MCT operates total of 117 trips to and from the industrial park. The transit district also serves Lakeview Commerce Center and the new Gateway Tradeport Park, which is home to one of the region's newest Amazon facilities.

Amazon has been growing on both sides of the river, opening eight separate facilities in the St. Louis area since 2016, which brings Amazon's total square footage in the market to over 4.5 million square feet. Two of the Amazon facilities are at Hazelwood Logistics Park, which benefits from dedicated bus service provided by Metro Transit. While overall Metro Transit experienced a 50% drop in ridership across the system in 2020 due to COVID-19, the service to the busy Hazelwood facility was maintained, helping to ensure that the essential workers at the myriad facilities there had the transit access they needed. Nearby at the Hazelwood Tradeport, continued development has prompted Metro to alter a bus route in March 2021 to travel closer to the site, which will provide better access for employees in the growing industrial area.

MCT and Metro Transit continue to require passengers and drivers to wear a mask or face covering on the bus and train and encourage social distancing.

"As transit agencies, we are committed to keeping our communities moving in the safest and most efficient way possible," Metro Transit Executive Director Jessica Mefford-Miller said. "We will continue to adapt and be flexible as workforce transportation needs evolve, because we understand just how essential public transportation is, not only to the growing industrial parks but also to our downtown core, area hospitals, universities, grocery stores and so many other important destinations."

"The Freightway's role in bringing all the stakeholders together with the transit agencies to better communicate their specific needs was significant," said Steve Zuber, principal with Barber Murphy Commercial Real Estate Solutions, who recognizes the importance of public transit access to economic development. "People were heard, and something was done because of it. The outcome underscores how phenomenal the spirit of cooperation is within this region."

Mary Lamie, vice president of multimodal enterprises for Bi-State Development and head of the St. Louis Regional Freightway, places the credit with all of those willing to engage on this important issue.

"The openness to collaborate has strengthened the business climate and resulted in a workforce competitive edge as the growing companies in the region's various industrial parks are able to more efficiently get their employees to and from their facilities," said Lamie. "The number one criteria for site selection is workforce availability, and Metro Transit and MCT are stepping up to provide reliable access to workforce transportation to a larger labor force, helping support and attract new manufacturing and logistics industries to the region's bi-state market and creating opportunities for expansion for existing companies."

For specific MCT schedule details, timetables are posted at www.mct.org and will be available at MCT stations, on MCT buses and at locations throughout Madison County. MCT also oversees RideFinders, the region's rideshare program, and it continues to modify its vanpool program to offer more direct, customized vanpool options at reduced rates, providing another alternative to reach the industrial parks. For details about MCT services, call (618) 797-INFO (4636), visit www.mct.org, or e-mail info@mct.org.

For more information on Metro Transit services in the St. Clair County Transit District, visit scctd.org, metrostlouis.org or contact Metro Transit Information at 314-231-2345 (phone) or 314-207-9786 (text), Monday to Friday from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.

About Madison County Transit

Madison County Transit (MCT) provides multi-modal transportation services for Madison County, Illinois. MCT operates a fixed-route bus service, connecting to MetroLink; express weekday commuter service directly to and from downtown St. Louis; and seasonal express service the Muny. For elderly and disabled residents who are unable to use the fixed-route buses, MCT provides complementary door to door service. MCT is also responsible for the construction and maintenance of more than 137 miles of bikeways that comprise the MCT Trails system, as well as overseeing RideFinders, the St. Louis region's FREE carpooling and vanpooling program.

About Metro Transit

Metro Transit operates the St. Louis region's public transportation system which includes more 400 clean-burning diesel buses that serve 68 MetroBus routes in eastern Missouri and southwestern Illinois. Metro also operates MetroLink light rail vehicles on 46 miles of track serving 38 stations in the two-state area, and operates Metro Call-A-Ride, a paratransit fleet of 123 vans. Metro Transit is a Bi-State Development enterprise.

About St. Louis Regional Freightway

The St. Louis Regional Freightway is a Bi-State Development enterprise formed to create a regional freight district and comprehensive authority for freight operations and opportunities within eight counties in Illinois and Missouri which comprise the St. Louis metropolitan area. Public sector and private industry businesses are partnering with the St. Louis Regional Freightway to establish the bi-state region as one of the premier multimodal freight hubs and distribution centers in the United States through marketing, public advocacy, and freight and infrastructure development. The St. Louis regional

Freightway also hosts the annual FreightWeekSTL, which draws freight and transportation experts from around the country to share ideas and collaborate on the forward movement of America's growing freight industry while also highlighting the St. Louis region's enviable location as the epicenter of American logistics.