

Moving METRO Forward with Momentum

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The Greater Portland Transit District (METRO) has increased its ridership by almost 35 percent in the last five years, primarily through system modernization, partnerships, route expansion and public awareness. The agency had record ridership of 1.95 million in 2018, breaking the 1.8 million mark reached in 2017, and is on track to beat that record in 2019.

METRO General Manager/Chief Executive Officer Greg Jordan has worked in the public transit profession for more than 20 years. Before joining METRO in 2013, he was deputy director in Tempe, AZ, where he led a large multimodal public transit program. Moving to the coast of Maine meant learning how to run public transit in extreme cold instead of extreme heat and figuring out a cost-effective strategy to clear snow from 500 bus stops. Yet the bigger challenge was building an effective and broadly used transit system when ridership, public support and funding for public transit services in Maine had waned during the preceding decades.

System Modernization

Initial improvements in 2014 mostly focused on bus stop placements—too many stops were too close together to make the system effective. Paring them down met with some resistance initially, but the exercise also paved the way for many more enhancements and

public engagement opportunities.

System upgrades have continued at a fast pace. Routes were streamlined; express service added; Sunday and holiday service expanded; the number of bus shelters doubled; and frequency increased on most routes. “Real-time” bus arrival tracking, texting and trip planning was implemented in 2016 and the introduction of new branding and installation of Wi-Fi on all buses was completed last year. Plans are underway to introduce automated fare collection and develop a new circulator route in downtown Portland.

Partnerships

In 2015, Portland Public Schools looked to delay the start time of their three high schools but lacked the resources to make the changes. Partnering with METRO was the creative solution to their dilemma, which also led to increasing ridership, improving overall awareness of public transit and breaking down stigmas about riding the bus. More than 2,000 high school students ride METRO on weekdays, to and from school, and also use public transit on nights, weekends and school breaks.

In 2018, METRO partnered with the University of Southern Maine (USM) to introduce the Husky Line route as part of a larger expansion project where students, staff and faculty can access all of the system’s routes using their USM ID (U-PASS). METRO also partners with Southern Maine Community College (SMCC) and is working with the state’s largest hospital, Maine Medical Center, to start an employee program later this year. Additional partnerships will be



USM students boarding METRO buses on the Gorham campus on the first day of classes for the fall 2018 semester. The new buses were branded to feature USM’s mascot.

developed as fare structure improvements are implemented.

These system enhancements and partnerships have improved public transit service and infrastructure in the region. “METRO has spent the last decade laying the groundwork for the tremendous success we have had in ridership growth,” said longtime METRO board member and Westbrook City Councilor Michael Foley. “From new routes in member communities and partnerships, we’ve been able to increase our coverage area exponentially, netting these amazing results.”

Route Expansions

Using federal grants, METRO BREEZ, an express service connecting Portland with three northern towns, launched in 2016 as a pilot. The communities of Yarmouth, Freeport and Brunswick will vote this year on whether to continue (and pay for) this popular service, which has exceeded annual projections by 20,000 boardings.

Last year, METRO’s Transit West Expansion included the new Husky Line route, featuring USM’s mascot on its buses, among Portland, Westbrook, Gorham and the two USM campuses; expanded service options for the city of Westbrook; and the introduction of public transit to town of Gorham residents.

“Establishing new express services between the urban core and surrounding communities has helped us to tap into a commuter base that previously had to rely on automobiles,” said Belinda Ray, METRO board president and Port-

land city councilor. “Add to that the recent rebranding effort that has made METRO buses more physically and philosophically attractive, and it’s easy to see why METRO’s numbers are up.”

Public Awareness

Over the past several years, METRO has expanded its community outreach through marketing campaigns and building relationships with stakeholder groups. Last year, the agency introduced a new logo on its buses, bus stops and communication materials and redesigned its website. In response to input from high school students, METRO developed a campaign, “Expect Respect,” for bus riders to report harassment or safety concerns.

While Greater Portland METRO continues moving forward with system enhancements and technical upgrades, it still faces many of the same challenges impacting other agencies. The job market has greatly affected the ability to hire and retain bus operators and limited funding influences what projects can be completed.

This year, METRO is implementing new fare pricing and introducing automatic fare payment systems, working collaboratively between multiple and separate public transit systems with varying fare structures. Complex negotiations are often involved in improving the regional transit network for the riders it serves.

To learn more about these projects, visit www.gpmetro.org, call 207-774-0351 or email info@gpmetro.org. You can reach Greg Jordan at gjordan@gpmetro.org or Denise Beck at dbeck@gpmetro.org.



METRO’s new branding, introduced in August 2018, is featured on the system’s 11 new buses, hundreds of bus stops, rebranded website and communication materials.



METRO BREEZ express bus service provides transportation Monday-Saturday among Portland, Yarmouth, Freeport (home of L.L. Bean) and Brunswick. Ridership on this service, launched in 2016 as part of a three-year pilot, has exceeded expectations.

