

**A Study of Factors that Inhibit and Enable Development of Sustainable
Regional Transit Systems in Southeastern Michigan**

The Role of Media and Public Opinion Efforts in the Transit Field: The Detroit Region Case Study

One of seven final reports resulting from this project.



MNTRC Report 12-22



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LEAD UNIVERSITY OF MNTRC

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REPORT 12-22

A Study of Factors that Inhibit and Enable Development of Sustainable
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THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION EFFORTS IN THE TRANSIT FIELD: THE DETROIT REGION CASE STUDY

One of seven final reports resulting from this project.

Claudia Bernasconi, M.ARCH
Marianosaria Di Palo, M.ARCH
Krysia Bussière, B.S. ARCH

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Mineta National Transit Research Consortium
College of Business
San José State University
San José, CA 95192-0219

Tel: (408) 924-7560
Fax: (408) 924-7565
Email: mineta-institute@sjsu.edu

transweb.sjsu.edu/mntrc/index.html

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During the course of this 15-month study, the authors interviewed over 60 leaders from five regions, Detroit, Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis. The UDM team is grateful for their time and candor in discussing their myriad transit issues and experiences with us. These leaders include:

- Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Leaders in all five regions
- RTA board presidents in Detroit, St. Louis and Denver
- Other RTA Board members in Atlanta and Detroit
- Metropolitan Planning Organizations in Southeast Michigan and in Atlanta
- Transit advocacy coalitions in St. Louis and Detroit
- Transit reporters in Detroit (*Crain's Business* and *Detroit News*) and Atlanta (*Atlanta Constitution*)
- University leaders and transit researchers in Atlanta (Georgia Tech) and St. Louis (Washington University)
- Mayors or Mayor's Offices in Detroit (Mayor) and Atlanta
- State legislators in Michigan and Georgia
- Transit campaign consultants in Denver
- Developers in Detroit and Cleveland
- Union leader in St. Louis
- Transit providers in Detroit (SMART, DDOT, M-1 Rail)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Media and public opinion are extremely important in the transportation field, as the support of public transit by users and the general public is critical to its success. Regional transit, with its natural crossing of geographic, political, cultural, economic and racial boundaries, is subject to the inflammation of controversy through the rapid and unfiltered exchange of opinions from diverse perspectives across all of those boundaries. Nonetheless, media and public opinion efforts can increase alignment between transit agencies' plans and priorities, and the public's needs and concerns. Media strategies can promote visibility of transit agencies and their initiatives, foster good levels of communication and interaction with the public, and become the basis for the inclusion of the public's perspective and input in the planning process.

This report discusses the role of media and public opinion efforts in the transit field. The overall goal of this study was the assessment of the nature and impact of media and public opinion efforts in the development of support for regional transit, towards the identification of key recommendations for building a positive public opinion regarding transit in future transit initiatives in Southeast Michigan. Media initiatives by selected transit agencies and advocacy groups in identified regions were analyzed, together with local print and online media coverage and local transit campaigns.

The analysis of key transit events in history and of key media initiatives in the four regions revealed that the Cleveland, St. Louis and Denver transit agencies/authorities have been more proactive in improving communication with the public. Tools employed by these regions include public hearings, community meetings, surveys, and other initiatives geared towards the increase of public awareness of the importance and benefit of public transportation, such as hosting transit conferences, and special events targeting the creation of a strong image of the transit agency/authority and its services. Table 5 includes an overview of key findings per region.

Three overarching themes emerged from the findings of the study of the four regions:

- The centrality of a good transit image.
- The importance of educating the public and media about the benefits of transit.
- The critical nature of appropriate strategies for educational campaigns in view of key transit events (e.g., a vote).

In depth research was also conducted on the Detroit Metro region, from a historical perspective and in current times. Summarizing, the following themes emerged in relation to the Detroit Metro region:

- The general low level of visibility of the outreach efforts by transit agencies/operators and advocacy groups.
- The inadequate use of online and social media tools.

- The inward-focused quality of communications (e.g., through e-newsletters emailed to rider lists and not available online), which reduces the capability of the system to speak to larger populations and interests groups.
- The interrelatedness of print media and social media/blogs.
- The politicization of the discourse about transit in the media.
- The disconnect between experts and the public.
- The positive image of transit as an abstract element, and the negative image of local transit in the media.

As a result of the research conducted on the comparable regions and Detroit, a set of recommendations for successful future media initiatives, and public opinion and involvement efforts for the Detroit region were identified. These recommendations, organized in four areas, were identified as key for the success of transit initiatives and transit system improvement: 1) Educating: tools for the public and media; 2) Branding: the building of a transit image; 3) Involving: Public involvement approaches; 4) Messaging: the bridging of regional divides. Each recommendation is discussed in detail in the report.

The study uncovered specific core themes/issues in media and public opinion, such as the necessity of key transit leaders to become desirable news sources for media; the value of communicating with the media community about transit on a regular basis; the interconnectedness of print media and social media (which cannot be considered in separate “either/or” categories), and the polarization of information; as well as the political nature of information about transit, the consequences of poor clarity in communicating about transit (see Table 5), and the role of media and public involvement strategies in building support for transit (as seen in the Denver and St. Louis regions). The worth of ensuring increased visibility of transit-related initiatives and of collaborative efforts in a region (in particular), and of branding and promoting a positive transit image (as seen in the Cleveland region), and finally the importance of recognizing the role of journalists, activists and bloggers as intermediaries (or “mediators”) between the public and transit agencies have also been identified.

As the Detroit region moves forward with plans and visions of regional transit, the strategizing and establishment of a coordinated public involvement approach constitute a priority. A continued involvement that begins in early stages of planning is necessary. This will ensure the development of public ownership of the plan and the increased awareness by the public of decision making processes and political mechanism that will promote trust in transit agencies and governmental bodies involved. The employment of a variety of media communication tools, including social media, by transit agencies, governmental bodies and transit advocates is suggested towards continuous communication with the public and media people. Open communication will be helpful in the education of the public and media, and the development of support for transit. The promotion of a positive image of transit (physical and digital), and a clear messaging capable of framing positively the contribution of transit to the region’s economy and quality of life is key. Finally, the

coordinated work of transit agencies and advocacy groups, and the increased visibility of their efforts in the region, will be important to build momentum for transit in the region.

This study strived to analyze highly varied and complex relationships between media, public opinion and support for transit in five regions (Cleveland, St. Louis, Atlanta, Denver, Detroit). Details and summaries of newspaper and online articles consulted can be found in appendixes to the various media chapters in the original reports.¹ Further research is advocated for the in depth understanding of resonances between media initiatives and specific transit-related events.

I. INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

This report focuses on the role of media and public opinion efforts in the transit field. This research is part of an overall study entitled *Factors that Inhibit and Enable Effective Regional Transit in Southeastern Michigan*, which was undertaken by 12 researchers from the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM), and was funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation (through the Mineta National Transit Research Consortium) and the Michigan Department of Transportation. The “factors” were divided into six areas: 1. leadership/politics, 2. governance/law, 3. finance, 4. transit-oriented development, 5. equity/access and 6. public opinion/media.

The overall comprehensive study comprised five interwoven threads that examined:

- Other regions: Experiences in other cities and related studies regarding the development and operation of effective regional transit systems.
- Detroit history: past successes and failures of Metro Detroit related to regional transit.
- Detroit’s current state and opportunities.
- Comparisons of Detroit to findings from other regions.
- Analysis and recommendations.

This report describes research conducted by the authors over the years 2012 and 2013 on the role of the media and public relations/public opinion efforts in enabling and inhibiting development of effective regional transit. The investigation included research regarding the success or failure of key media and opinion initiative in four comparative regions: Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis,² a study of media coverage on transit in the Detroit region from a historical perspective,³ the study of current (2007-2013) media initiatives and public opinion efforts in regard to public transit in the Detroit region,⁴ and the comparisons with other regions and recommendations for the Detroit region.⁵ The study of successful media and public opinion efforts and the analysis of unsuccessful ones are provided with suggestions to strengthen the influence of such efforts in the Detroit region. The mentioned reports can be found online at the University of Detroit Mercy Transportation Center website.⁶

NEED FOR THIS RESEARCH

For many years, efforts to develop effective regional mass transit in Metro Detroit have been thwarted by a wide variety of factors. These include conflicting interests of various governmental agencies and individuals, legal barriers, funding issues, labor/jobs issues, perceptions of competing objectives of transit-oriented development and commuter service, public opinion regarding transit and spending priorities, rider concerns (and perceptions)

regarding safety, and even ethnic prejudice.⁷ For decades, efforts to integrate regional bus services have failed, leaving Southeast Michigan (the Metropolitan Detroit region) with three transit agencies (Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART), Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) and Ann Arbor Transportation Authority (AATA)) that serve three distinct areas of the region, with poor interfaces between them. SMART and DDOT systems are struggling financially and have within the last year cut service and considered raising fares. Initiatives to restore rail-based transit have suffered a similar fate, as a privately funded initiative (M-1 Rail) and a publicly funded study (Detroit Transportation Options for Growth Study [DTOGS]) have failed to develop a joint project despite the honest efforts of many well intended people from the public and private sectors, including leaders from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and advisors from across the nation.

This study sought to learn from Detroit's history and the successes and failures of other regions in order to better understand the factors that enable and inhibit successful regional transit, and allowing our region to move forward to build such systems.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The overall goal of this study was the assessment of the nature and impact of media and public opinion efforts in the development of support for regional transit, towards the identification of key recommendations for building a positive public opinion regarding transit in future transit initiatives in Southeast Michigan. Media initiatives by selected transit agencies and advocacy groups in identified regions were analyzed, together with local print and online media coverage and local transit campaigns.

Specific objectives of the study included:

- Identifying key trends and issues connected with public opinion and involvement efforts and media initiatives by transit agencies in comparable regions.
- Analyzing past and current public opinion efforts, the relationship of transit agencies and groups with local media, and public involvement efforts by transit agencies and advocacy groups in the Metro Detroit region to understand key characteristics.
- Defining a set of recommendations for successful future media initiatives, and public opinion and involvement efforts for the Detroit region.

II. BACKGROUND

KEY CONCEPTS INTRODUCED

Public Opinion

Public opinion can be defined as the collective attitudes or beliefs held by the general public. Public opinion arises from the interaction of individuals with their social environments.⁸ With the ubiquitous network of social tools of today's interconnected world (e.g., radio, TV, Internet), public opinion is now shaped by many different sources. Contemporary society lives with increasingly localized and ubiquitous communication tools that are extremely varied and unfiltered. As a result, public opinion is a reflection of a complex crossroads of sources and conduits that create a melting pot of ideas.

Public Involvement

Public involvement, or public participation, refers to the process of inclusion of those who are affected by a decision in the decision-making process.⁹ The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991 gave new importance to metropolitan organizations and to collaborative planning. As a result, new emphasis has been given since then, and in an even more visible way in most recent years, to public involvement strategies for transportation planning and project implementation.

ISTEA was followed by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 1998, which defines the "public" as "citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of transportation agency employees, freight shippers, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transit, providers of freight transportation services and other interested parties." It is thought that public involvement can provide a way to settle controversies that existing institutions were unable to resolve.¹⁰

In a democratic society, public involvement is vital to ensure that elected representatives are receiving the collective opinion of the constituents. At the same time, public opinion as interpreted and conveyed by media, can inflame and increase controversy, rather than resolve it.

Media

Media describes any communication tool used to deliver information. The contemporary world is becoming increasingly digitized as newspapers and print media become obsolete with the shifting preference to virtual media integrated into mobile devices. Media is a modern phenomenon that acts as a cultural datum from which the public's awareness of contemporary issues can be measured.

Social Media

Social Media is the contemporary phenomena of web-based, user-submitted content exchanges that are revolutionizing how society communicates. Tools such as forums,

blogs, social networks, or video-sharing websites are basic examples of social media. Social media is distinguished from traditional (or “static”) media by its interactivity, with users choosing to share their experiences, opinions, and locations.¹¹ Because of its ubiquitous nature, social media is increasingly outpacing traditional media in its volume, circulation, and speed of transmission.

Media and Public Opinion Issues in Transportation

The pervasiveness of media can directly influence public opinion issues in transportation (or virtually any other area). Beyond the scope of press releases and other one-way expressions, digital communication tools can also raise the level of service with interactive features such as automated arrival and departure updates, real-time mapping, and route prediction tools. Transit organizations can take advantage of the ubiquitous nature of social media to service a geographically disparate yet technologically connected population. The idea that one can now indirectly share experiences and feelings through social media trademarks such as *tags* (which identify general terms related to a larger online posting such as a news column), *places* (a hybrid integration of mapping and marketing for businesses embedded within Google Maps), or the act of “liking” (an essential component of Facebook that allows users to share their preferences), allows for the image of transit to be co-shaped by users and agencies.

Media issues and public opinion are extremely important in the transportation field, as the support of public transit by users and the general public is key to its success, and regional transit, with its natural crossing of geographic, political, cultural, economic and racial boundaries, is subject to the inflammation of controversy through the rapid and unfiltered exchange of opinions from diverse perspective across all of those boundaries. Nonetheless, media and public opinion efforts can increase alignment between transit agencies’ plans and priorities, and the public’s needs and concerns. Media strategies can promote visibility of transit agencies and their initiatives, foster good levels of communication and interaction with the public, and become the basis for the inclusion of the public’s perspective and input in the planning process.

Public Involvement in Transportation Planning

Public involvement (also identified as *public participation*) in transportation can be defined as “The active and meaningful involvement of the public in the development of transportation plans and programs.”¹² Public involvement is the result of strategies and techniques geared towards increased communication and collaboration among the state, metropolitan planning organizations, public transportation providers, and the communities they serve.

The exchange of ideas and knowledge during public involvement efforts events is reciprocal: the dialogue increases public understanding and knowledge of transportation issues and plans as well as a better understanding and knowledge of transit officers and planners on issues, perspectives, values and needs of community members and groups. Effective and real public involvement does not expire in the pure communication process

but requires the openness of public agencies (public transit providers, transit authorities, etc.) to suggestions, opinions, and views of citizens.

Public reaction is solicited and evaluated and must subsequently be incorporated into future planning, coherently with limitations and other project priorities. For this reason, public involvement must happen early on in the planning process. The following statements on public involvement can be found in the Federal Highway Administration website, through the Office of Planning, Environment & Reality (HEP) page “Public Involvement/Public Participation.”¹³

Public involvement needs to be an early and continuing part of the transportation and project development process. It is essential that the project sponsor know the community’s values in order to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts, as well as to narrow the field of alternatives (for planning) and alignments (for projects). The community also needs to understand the constraints and tradeoffs of the transportation planning and project development process and to “buy-in” to the transportation needs and purpose.

Note that: *Effective public involvement is defined by a process versus a one-time event, and requires continuous interactions between transit/planning officers and public throughout planning and development stages of transit projects.*

The public involvement process can include interactions at a small scale, for example in the case of community meetings, and at a large scale, in the case of major campaigns to inform and shape public opinion on specific transit issues or plans.

THE STUDY AREA: THE DETROIT REGION

Transit Providers

Three transit providers serve Detroit and its immediate suburbs: the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART), the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), and the Detroit People Mover (DPM). An additional key player in transit issues for this region is the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), the area’s metropolitan planning organization (MPO).

Public Act 204 established the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) in 1967. In 1989, Public Act 481 of 1988 amended Public Act 204 reorganizing SEMTA and omitting the city of Detroit. The new authority was named SMART. SMART utilizes the SEMCOG Public Participation Plan.¹⁴

The city’s bus system is managed by DDOT, previously structured as the Department of Street Railways (DSR), providing public transit since the 1920s.¹⁵ In 1956, streetcar service was phased out and 1962 marked the end of trolley coach operation. Downtown trolley service was discontinued in 2003. In 2006, the Detroit Transportation Options for Growth Study (DTOGS)¹⁶ re-evaluated the option of restoring rapid transit on major Detroit

corridors such as Woodward Avenue. Currently, DDOT is the largest transit carrier in the state of Michigan.

The DPM was established as part of an Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA) demonstration project to determine whether an automated system could operate at a lower cost than traditional bus systems while providing effective circulation to revitalize the central business district. The Detroit Transportation Corporation (DTC) assumed full ownership of the DPM and responsibility for its completion.¹⁷ On July 31, 1987, the system began operating revenue service. The system exists as an elevated light rail system, which operates for approximately 118.5 hours a week at 75 cents per ride, collecting passengers from 13 stations within a quarter-mile of one another. Each station houses major works of art to make up the Art in the Stations exhibit, which has won multiple national and international awards.

SEMCOG was established in 1968. The council was created as a regional planning partnership in Southeast Michigan and receives funding through the federal government and through state grants, contracts and membership dues.¹⁸ Local elected officials represent citizens in the council. The council acts on behalf of all counties, cities, villages, townships, intermediate school districts, community colleges and public universities that are members to analyze and solve issues that affect the region. SEMCOG is currently responsible for the planning of regional transportation as the region's MPO. The council holds Member Outreach Meetings to allow for input and discussion from SEMCOG members.

Public Involvement

Various Michigan groups and transit agencies have published reports and documents on public involvement. In particular, SEMCOG released a *Participation Plan* in 2011.¹⁹ This plan includes references to blogs, websites, newsletter, news releases and emails and discusses each of these tools in relation to the capability of increasing interaction with the public so as to educate and inform the public and gather input and feedback from the public. The document also includes an overview of visualization techniques, such as interactive mapping, use of online maps and YouTube videos.

MDOT also provides its transit officials and the public with a public participation plan available online.²⁰ Among the techniques of involvement listed, we find video techniques, Internet use, media releases and mailing lists, next to more traditional ones, such as public meetings, community advisory committees, and collaborative task forces.

Finally, the City of Detroit also has a *Public Participation and Involvement Plan* (2011).²¹ The goals of the plan include:

- Goal 1: To inform/educate the general public about DDOT programs and the benefits of public transit.
- Goal 2: To develop and implement activities designed to engage the public's participation to support DDOT's planning criteria and strategies.

- Goal 3: To receive and process feedback for DDOT projects.
- Goal 4: To enlist representatives from DDOT's key stakeholders to form partnerships for consensus building.

The plan is detailed and presents tools for each of the goals. As an example, Goal 4 includes the following tools:

- Develop a partnership agreement with key stakeholder groups,
- Extend invitations to advocacy groups, community-based organizations, governmental agencies, businesses, contractors, schools, educational institutions to form alliances,
- Conduct focus groups to solicit ideas,
- Conduct surveys,
- Collect feedback forms,
- Establish partnerships with key stakeholders,
- Develop a mailing list of community groups to distribute DDOT materials, and
- Hold periodic partnership meetings (quarterly).

What has been presented in this section reflects plans and policies versus current levels of media and public opinion efforts for the Detroit region.

COMPARABLE REGIONS

The following process was employed to select the four peer regions. The study team first identified 16 candidate regions based on their personal knowledge and public data. Then, local and national leaders were consulted, including the study advisory team composed of transit leaders from MDOT, SMART, M-1 Rail, SEMCOG and Transportation Riders United (TRU). The following criteria were used for the selection of regions: size and distribution of population and jobs, existing uncoordinated transit systems, downtown characteristics, ethnic diversity/issues of segregation, socio-economic gap in the community, type of governance, growth of the area, transformation in governance, and political issues/contention. Each of the selected regions differs from the Detroit region in several aspects, but at the same time provides for a certain level of comparability in certain issues. Therefore, comparable regions allowed for research on specific issues as a means to identify comparisons and recommendations for the Detroit region. The extended team of researchers selected and visited four comparable regions: Cleveland, Atlanta, Denver, and St. Louis. Details on characteristics of the four selected regions for the various criteria can be found in the *Transit Lessons for Detroit from Four Peer Regions 2013*.²²

III. METHODS

Methods used to analyze the data on media and public opinion efforts and to formulate recommendations on the topic include the following:

- Study of key transit and media events and media coverage in history for the Detroit region (1994-2007).
- Analysis of local news coverage on transit issues and initiatives for peer regions and the Detroit region (2007-2013).
- Study of transit reports on public involvement and media initiatives.
- Review of reports from and interviews with transit leaders and advocacy groups from team visits to the Detroit region and the selected comparable regions.
- Interviews with local journalists to understand overall media orientation towards transit in key moments.
- Analysis of public opinion surveys, rider surveys, and likely voters surveys.
- Study of transit agencies' and advocacy groups' website information and news/press releases.
- Analysis of levels of engagement in social media by transit groups and agencies (including websites, call lines, blogs, e-newsletters, etc.).
- Study of campaign/outreach materials of transit agencies and advocacy groups in comparable regions and the Detroit region.

FOUR PEER REGIONS

Data about transit agencies and transit advocacy groups from the four comparable regions (Cleveland, St. Louis, Atlanta, and Denver) were retrieved online by consulting 26 websites. Data on media and public opinion efforts were retrieved through agencies' annual reports, news releases and other transit operators' materials available online, which represent a good source of data on ridership, transit plans and initiatives, as well as public involvement efforts. Public opinion surveys available online were also consulted. Online search provided the basic information for the analysis of significant events in the development of a regional transit system from a historical media and public involvement perspective.

News coverage in major magazines of the regions was studied, as well as level of engagement of transit agencies in social media. A range of 10 to 20 articles per region, from online magazines and print media, were consulted to analyze local news media coverage, considered as an external source that can contribute to transit initiatives, and as a means to understand the public's perspective, perception of, and reaction to transit initiatives, as well as the level of involvement in and information on transit initiatives. Other methods

utilized to conduct this research include: interviews of key transit agency personnel and local advocacy group leaders during the site visits, participation in transit presentations on public involvement and transit in the Detroit region, consultation of a number of National Cooperative Highway Research Program reports, and Transit Cooperative Research Program reports.

DETROIT REGION

A total of 109 articles from 1994 to 2006 were accessed to understand and identify key transit events, media initiatives and public involvement efforts in history for the Detroit region. Articles were retrieved online from NewsBank and LexisNexis databases using the keyword “transit” as well as with keywords related to important transit initiatives by year. The three news sources consulted included *Detroit News*, *Detroit Free Press* and *Lansing State Journal*. Articles consulted were categorized based on a positive, negative or neutral attitude (i.e., tone of coverage or position of the authors) towards transit. These attitudes/positions may have resonated with the public’s perception of key transit events.

A total of 150 articles from January 2007 through May 2013 were scrutinized. Articles were retrieved online from the LexisNexis database using the keywords “regional transit” and were also categorized based on the positive, negative or neutral attitude towards transit. The three local news sources consulted for this phase of study included *Detroit News*, *Detroit Free Press* and *Crain’s Detroit Business*.

Articles were also studied for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of possible interrelations between news coverage and the outcomes of efforts to establish regional transit. The selection of keywords and of news sources was guided by the study of transit issues and initiatives through the years. For example, after 2007 the business community in the Detroit region became more heavily involved in transit initiatives, and therefore it made sense to study news coverage by *Crain’s Detroit Business* newspaper. Similarly, the term “regional” has become a more frequent component of news articles of the Detroit region in recent years, and keyword selection reflected this change.

In addition, a total of 23 news articles from 2007 to 2013 were consulted. Articles were retrieved online from three major news outlets (*MLive*, *MetroTimes* and *Huffington Post*) by using the keywords “public involvement,” “public hearings,” and “campaigns.” Online articles were categorized as positive, negative or neutral towards the local transit agencies and advocacy groups.

Data about local transit agencies/providers (SMART, DDOT and DPM) and key advocacy groups were retrieved through online search of agency websites, review of documents including annual reports, press releases or newsletters, surveys and other material available on public transit initiatives, plans and community involvement, as well as interviews with key personnel from the main transit organizations and groups, and of the key local reporters covering transit in the region. A total of 43 websites were analyzed. Additional information was also retrieved by attending the Metro Detroit Transit Workshop at University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit in May 2013.²³

The underlined assumption in this study was that a particular perspective covered or emphasized in local news media can shape or influence the public debate and public opinion.

IV. FINDINGS

PUBLIC OPINION AND INVOLVEMENT EFFORTS AND MEDIA INITIATIVES IN COMPARABLE REGIONS

The study of media and public opinion efforts on the comparable regions suggested several significant trends and issues, which are discussed by region. Overall findings and their applicability to the Detroit region are presented in the concluding section of the findings. More details on specific news articles and media initiatives on the comparable regions can be found in the original report.²⁴

Cleveland

A brief list of the major events in the development of a regional transit system in Cleveland and on media strategies and public opinion and involvement efforts was compiled through literature review and online research, as seen in Table 1. Overall, the transit process in Cleveland is one of unification and coordination, with cuts of service where and when ridership declined, but overall sustained ridership numbers in the most recent years. Based on the findings, the Greater Cleveland Transit Authority (GCRTA) seems strongly involved in public relations/public opinion efforts. In 1989, the GCRTA conducted an employee-driven effort campaign called Drive for Excellence Campaign, to increase ridership numbers and improve the image of the transit agency in the community. Additionally, the GCRTA has been nationally recognized by winning several awards in the areas of excellence of service, safety, and advertising. In particular, in 1986, GCRTA won awards from the National Safety Council, the Greater Cleveland Safety Council, the American Public Transit Association, as well as several awards for advertising.²⁵ Most recently, in 2011, the agency received awards for its increased efforts in sustainability (Emerald Award from Crain's Cleveland Business) and for its HealthLine project (Award of Excellence from the Urban Land Institute).

Table 1. Major Historic Transit and Media Events, Cleveland Region, 1971-2011

Year	Event	Media and Public Opinion Efforts
1970	Drop in ridership helps lead to creation of a regional system: Regional Transit Authorities.	
1972	Five Greater Cleveland counties participate in a mass transit study.	
1974	Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) created.	
1982		GCRTA hosts American Public Transit Association (APTA) Rapid Transit Conference. More than 700 attend.
1986	GCRTA provides more than 80 million rides to customers. On-time performance improved to 93%.	GCRTA wins awards from National Safety Council, Greater Cleveland Safety Council, (APTA), as well as several awards for transit advertising.
1987	GCRTA's annual report mentions Dual Hub Corridor project; later becomes Euclid Corridor Transportation Project.	RTAnswerline (phone information) begins.
1989		GCRTA starts Drive for Excellence Campaign to increase ridership and improve GCRTA's image.
1991		APTA awards GCRTA the prestigious Public Transportation System Outstanding Achievement Award. GCRTA begins Arts-in-Transit program, displaying public art at major transit facilities.
1993	GCRTA Board of Trustees adopts Authority's first-ever long-range plan.	
1995		GCRTA introduces its first website.
1996	Euclid Corridor is to be better served by a future Bus Rapid Transit line; a GCRTA rail extension becomes operational.	GCRTA undertakes an update of long-range plan, using internal and external surveys and analysis of regional travel trends.
1997	GCRTA revise its long-range plan, adding more than 40 projects.	
2001		City of Solon receives a Community Impact award from Inside Business magazine, for partnering with GCRTA to improve job access. GCRTA conducts regular surveys of current riders, potential customers, and the general public.
2006		GCRTA upgrades its website, adds automated trip planner and begins e-newsletter. GCRTA launches Transit Watch, a public awareness and educational campaign.
2007		Euclid Corridor now includes participation of noted cardiologist Toby Cosgrove of the Cleveland Clinic.
2008	HealthLine is built.	Local foundations, business community, nonprofits, cities of Cleveland and East Cleveland, the Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals, federal officials, and GCRTA join to organize a community event – drawing attention to the city's many cultural and intellectual assets.

Year	Event	Media and Public Opinion Efforts
2009	Ridership increases in 2008 for record 6th straight year.	
2010		January: GCRTA holds 10 public meetings to gather community input. More than 1,000 people attend. April 27: GCRTA began using social media, Twitter. May 2-5: GCRTA hosts the Bus & Paratransit Conference and International Bus Roadshow. More than 1,000 people attend the events. September 30: GCRTA adds Facebook page.
2011		GCRTA receives awards of excellence; introduces a special page to help people find transit alternatives.

Sources: Case Western Reserve University, *Urban Transportation - The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History* (2012), <http://ech.case.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=UT1> (accessed August 16, 2012). Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA); "About RTA: History of Public Transit in Greater Cleveland" (2005), http://www.riderta.com/ar_RTAhistory.asp (accessed December 19, 2012); Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA), *Planning & Development - Transit 2025 Plan* (December 2004), <http://www.riderta.com/transit2025/> (accessed December 19, 2012).

Transit in the Cleveland region has experienced a gradual decline since 1980, as seen in Figure 1.²⁶ In the years 2011 and 2012 (not shown in figure), GCRTA experienced a strong increase in ridership, respectively a 3.6 percent and a 4.3 percent increase, for a total of 48.2 million passenger trips in 2012.²⁷

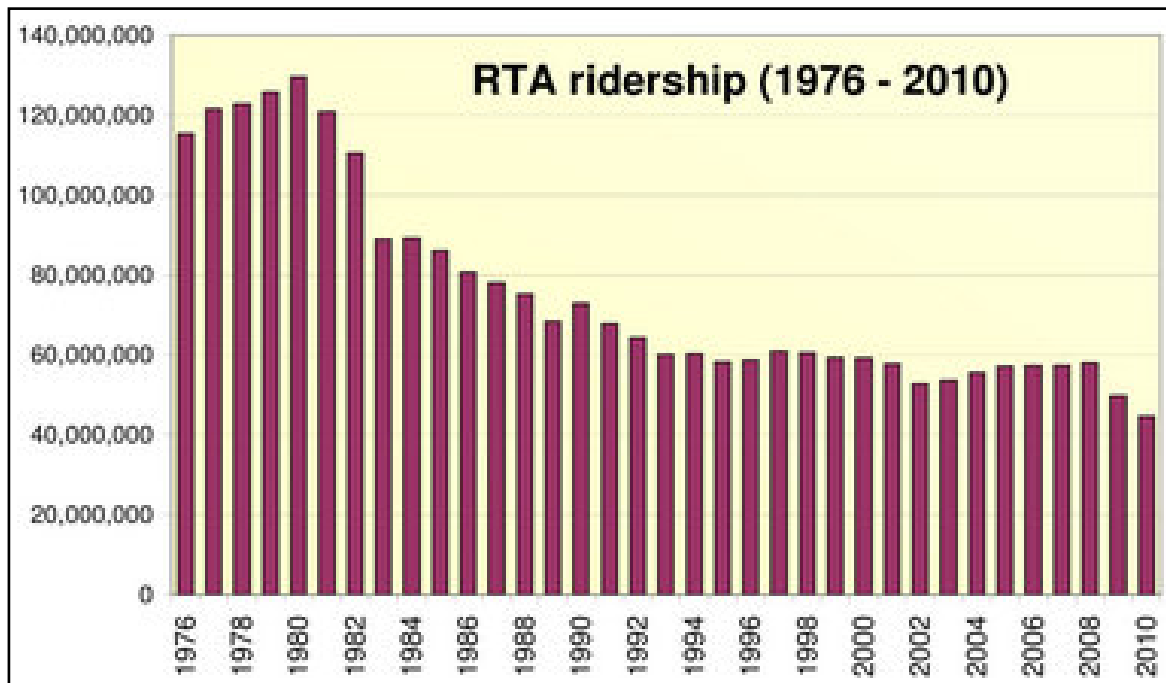


Figure 1. Ridership Decline in the Cleveland Region, 1976-2010

Source: Rich Exner, "Greater Cleveland RTA ridership is down 39% since 1990, 66% since record high in 1980," *Plain Dealer*, February 14, 2011, http://www.cleveland.com/datacentral/index.ssf/2011/02/greater_cleveland_rta_ridershi_1.html (accessed December 21, 2012).

GCRTA has relied on public hearings, community meetings, surveys, and other initiatives geared towards the increase in public awareness of the importance and benefit of public transportation. Initiatives include hosting transit conferences, and special programs and events targeting the creation of a strong image of the GCRTA and its services.²⁸ The successful media and public opinion strategies have sustained the GCRTA's focus on economic development and private-public partnerships.

GCRTA is currently engaging a variety of media strategies to reach out to the public and build support for the system and to increase ridership. Strategies include: the RTAnswerline (601,000 calls), the GCRTA website (2.3 million visitors), a mobile device-targeted website (34,000 visitors), an online store, Commuter Alerts (1,510 subscribers), and an e-newsletter (8,100 subscribers). All the data above listed is current as of December 31, 2011.²⁹

In 1987, GCRTA instituted the telephone RTAnswerline still in use today, and recently available in two languages. In 1995, the GCRTA introduced its first website. Currently, the website is up to date and very informative, releasing a high number of news releases per year (from 114 to 153) (RTA 2012 b). Figure 8 includes an overview of numbers of online news releases by GCRTA in comparison with other regions.

GCRTA has been successful in terms of recent overall ridership growth, cost, safety and transit-oriented development (TOD), and has become a strong and independent agency. Starting in 2003, ridership continued to grow for six consecutive years. As stated in the *Plain Dealer* article of January 2011 (Breckenridge 2011) GCRTA experienced a drop in ridership in 2009 (14 percent) and 2010 (10 percent).³⁰ By December 31, 2011, ridership increased again and counted 46.2 million passenger trips.³¹

A brief study of media coverage was conducted by this team to gain a general understanding of the opinions, attitudes and orientations towards transit that the local media gave voice to in the Cleveland region. Overall, 11 articles from 1970 to 2011 were examined. Five of the articles consulted were available in print. All the articles were retrieved in September 2012.

Around 2007-2009, several websites and magazines (Cuyahoga County Planning Commission website, Cleveland.com including the *Plain Dealer* magazine, and *Metro Magazine* online newspaper)³² started covering news on GCRTA and related transit issues. The coverage of GCRTA, both in print magazines and websites peaked around the year 2009 which follows the HealthLine launch. A detailed comparison of major local magazine coverage on GCRTA is shown in Figure 2.

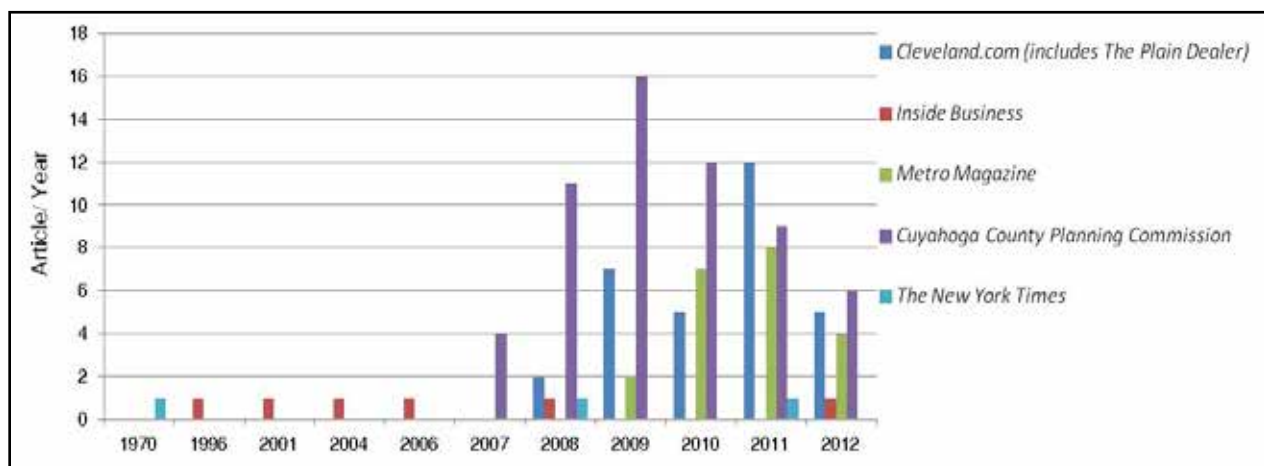


Figure 2. Local News Coverage on Transit in the Cleveland Region, 1970-2012

Source: Cleveland.com [website], <http://www.cleveland.com>; *Plain Dealer* [website], <http://www.plaindealer.com>; *Metro Magazine* [website], <http://metro-magazine.com>; Cuyahoga County Planning Commission [website], <http://planning.co.cuyahoga.oh.us/>; *New York Times* [website], <http://www.nytimes.com>.

It is not possible to trace direct relationships between the number of articles and specific transit events, nor would it be appropriate to simplify the complex relationships among events, opinions, and media coverage to a simple cause-effect relationship. At the same time, the number of articles covering transit issues and initiatives in specific years does provide an understanding of the visibility of transit initiatives to the public, or the general interest of the community on these issues, and the amount of information (factual or judgmental) available to the public.

The changes in news coverage also reflect new interests by certain news sources, or a shift in perspective or approach to transit issues by the various news sources. For

example, news coverage by the Cuyahoga County planning news source increased in 2009, the year in which ridership numbers shrank significantly. This may reflect coverage of issues and complaints or articles covering the ridership fall or increased perceived urgency of transit themes by the media and general community. On the other hand, the *Plain Dealer* and the *Metro Magazine* coverage on transit issues peaked in 2011, when ridership was increasing. This confirms that a broad approach to data is needed, where data from a variety of sources (number and content of media articles, opinions from the public, outcomes of involvement efforts, and perspectives by transit personnel) must be examined comprehensively to derive general, overarching themes.

Overall, measures of effectiveness of GCRTA's media and public opinion strategies can be identified by the amount of expressed positive public opinion about the transit system, as portrayed in media articles, ridership increases, and the general capability of GCRTA to promote partnerships and communicate with diverse stakeholder groups in the region. Our research confirms that the number of public events held by the agency and the number of participants in those events was high, and that in the effort to attract new riders and to enhance public transit awareness, GCRTA established effective connections with local communities, holding meetings, group discussions and proposing initiatives that engaged residents, neighborhood groups, and stakeholders.³³ The continuous participation in community events around the city, including speaking engagements, informational sessions, special programs and other efforts, ensured continued visibility of GCRTA, and promoted its favorable image as an engaged institution.³⁴

One additional example of effective public opinion efforts lies in the GCRTA efforts to brand new service and attract new clients. In particular, the *Transit 2025* plan refers to studies of current riders and specific strategies to attract diverse rider groups, and refers to the concept of up-selling to current customers as well as to cross-sell, that is, sell new items to current customers, and to attract new customer groups.³⁵

The recent Euclid Corridor HealthLine branding and advertising has been particularly successful in creating a new "safe and first class" image of transit attracting choice riders and increasing satisfaction of dependent riders.³⁶ Finally, the whole streetscape design (see Figure 3 and Figure 4), including new paving, benches, and trees, and environmental graphics contributed to make the new BRT a sort of urban showcase of the current and future transit opportunities, a carefully and cohesively designed package capable of uplifting GCRTA's public face.³⁷



Figure 3. Euclid Corridor in Cleveland

Source: Euclid Ave., HealthLine. Authors' photos, August 20, 2012.



Figure 4. Station Design of the HealthLine in Cleveland

Source: HealthLine transit station. Authors' photos, August 20, 2012.

It can be argued that the new Euclid Corridor design and the new image of the bus service increased public satisfaction by improving the transit experience and by bringing to the public's attention the capability of transit to contribute to urban quality and to quality of life. As an example of public opinion captured and made visible by media coverage, an article by Tom Breckenridge's "HealthLine exceeds expectations: 10M riders since launch in 2008" was published in the *Plain Dealer* on April 27, 2011, and describes an increase in ridership and an increase in satisfaction among people:³⁸

Riders, for the most part, say the HealthLine is a dependable, efficient ride. "It's better than the regular buses" high school student Willie Gambrell, 18 of Cleveland, said... "There are less stops. The buses are cleaner, they have more room."

More details on news coverage that portrays opinions from the public can be found in the original report.³⁹

St. Louis

The process of unification of the transit system in St. Louis started in 1960 with the Bi-State Development Agency (BSDA) (called Metro Transit since 2003) as regional coordinator.⁴⁰ The establishment of MetroLink in the 1990s generated a growth in ridership numbers. Starting in 1999, ridership declined requiring several cuts of services.⁴¹

The agency has undertaken several media and public opinion-gathering efforts, especially during the debut of MetroLink in 1993, and between 2000 and 2010, after the agency experienced cuts in funding for public transit operations. Metro Transit has been involved in public opinion efforts, such as participation in community meetings, transit workshops and major campaigns.

Initiatives include a public engagement effort to develop the Moving Transit Forward transit plan for the St. Louis region and to move Metro Transit into the future, involving residents throughout the region. As stated in the *Comprehensive Annual Financial Report of June 2011*, Metro Transit “received the second place award from the International Association of Public Participation for the innovative program used by Metro to create the region’s first 30-year long range plan.”⁴² Table 2 includes a summary of major history and media events from the 1980s to present.⁴³

Table 2. Major Historic Transit and Media Events, St. Louis Region, 1960-2010

Year	Event	Media And Public Opinion Efforts
1960	Bi-State Development Agency (BSDA) proposed by St. Louis County Supervisor James McNary as a unified and coordinated system.	
1963	BSDA officially assumes operations of transit facilities it purchased from the region's 15 private firms.	
1980s	Energy crisis of 1979 helps instigate dramatic growth in bus ridership. Despite financial burdens of the 1980s, BSDA maintain efforts of growth and progress.	Agency establishes the Arts-In-Transit program, and introduces Call-A-Ride, a demand-response service designed to ensure accessibility for customers with disabilities.
1987	East-West Gateway Coordinating Council (the region's metropolitan planning organization) completes study that explores several options for transit improvements. Light rail transit system with bus interface is selected as the preferred alternative.	
1993	MetroLink debuts with a 3-day, fare-free introduction to the St. Louis region.	More than 180,000 ride MetroLink during the 3-day introduction. By Labor Day, only a month after beginning regular service, the millionth passenger boards MetroLink.
1994	MetroLink's contribution to regional economic development becomes evident through significant investments made in areas near MetroLink.	
1999	Federal transit operations funding of public transit agencies ends nationally.	
2000s	Declining financial resources become a reality for Metro Transit, resulting in numerous internal changes to address the funding deficit. While the Agency faces funding issues, Metro Transit actually grows and expands service throughout decade.	In 2003, BSDA changes its name to Metro Transit.
2006		Metro Call-A-Ride expands service hours.
2009	Metro Transit's ability to do more with less funding comes to an end; the Agency is forced to reduce service. Fortunately, the State of Missouri is able to provide a one-time emergency appropriation to the Agency, allowing Metro Transit to temporarily restore some of the service that was reduced in March. Metro Transit begins to develop a regional transit plan known as Moving Transit Forward, a 30-year, long-range transit plan for the St. Louis region.	Metro Transit begins a public engagement effort with the East-West Gateway Council of Governments to develop the Moving Transit Forward transit plan for the St. Louis region, based on extensive public input, market research and consideration of existing and future transit technologies. Citizens for Modern Transit, local advocacy group, conducts a strong educational campaign.
2010	New funding source for Metro Transit is provided through tax initiative in St. Louis County, allowing the Agency to begin implementation of the Moving Transit Forward long-range plan, first restoring MetroBus, MetroLink and Metro Call-A-Ride service.	As Metro Transit moves into the future, the Agency's goal is to move transit forward in the St. Louis region while operating with transparency, fiscal integrity and efficiency, and to involve the people of the region in that effort.

Source: Metro Transit, St. Louis, "History of early street railways in St. Louis" (2010), <http://www.metrostlouis.org/About/History.aspx> (accessed January 8, 2014).

Metro Transit has engaged several media and public opinion tools in its effort to interact with the public, and build support for its systems and future plans. Agency personnel (interviewed during the St. Louis October 2012 visit) emphasized the priority of communicating with the public, and referred to an ideal scenario in which a person from within the community could make the case for transit to the local audience, and promote the transit initiatives and plans. Among the strategies used by the agency to foster public involvement are the following:

- One-on-one conversations (200 in just a few months) with community leaders and phone calls to explain the importance and significance of public involvement.
- Numerous public meetings (2010-2012) to receive the public's input on the design of the system.
- Board meetings and committee meetings.
- Educational campaigns in connection to votes on pro-transit initiatives (Half-cent tax increase ballots in 2008, Proposition M, and 2010, Proposition A).
- Surveys (1993, 2008) on the public's priorities and on public opinion on the transit long-range plan.

The Metro Transit Agency recognizes the critical importance of online communication as an educational tool to increase public understanding and appreciation of public transit. The agency provided the public with a website,⁴⁴ a call line for customers with disabilities, a Metro Memo e-newsletter, and engaged with social media. Metro Transit's most popular social media are: Facebook (1,912 subscribers to Facebook Metro 2012), Twitter (4,729 followers of Twitter Metro 2012), YouTube (40 subscriptions to YouTube 2012). Flickr and Scribd are also extensively used by the transit agency. All data listed above were retrieved on December 15, 2012. According to Ken Leiser, a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, in an article published April 8, 2010, new communication networks, in particular Facebook, Twitter and blogs, allowed the agency to reach and involve more people in transportation decisions (e.g., younger voters).⁴⁵

A brief study of media coverage was conducted to get a general understanding of the local media orientation with regard to public transit in St Louis. Overall, 23 articles from 2002 through 2010 were reviewed. Twelve (12) of the 23 articles reviewed are available online. Eleven (11) of the articles consulted were available only as printed copies. All the articles were reviewed between May and October 2012.

During the team visit to Metro Transit, several Metro Link staff members highlighted not only the importance of educating the public on transit strategic planning and on specific choices (e.g., rail systems versus bus systems), but also the critical importance of educating media about public transit as a first step. The most popular local online magazines include: *St. Louis Business Journal*, *Riverfront Times* (RFT), *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, nextStl, and Citizens for Modern Transit-St. Louis.⁴⁶ Figure 5 includes an overview of coverage in local media. An item to note is the extensive coverage of transit issues by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) through its online press releases.

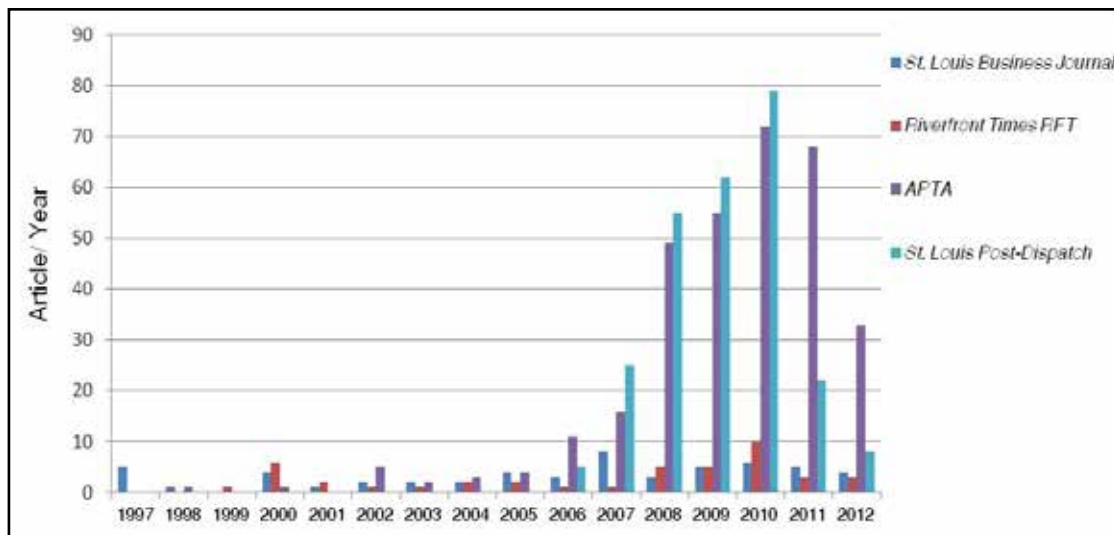


Figure 5. Local News Coverage on Transit in the St. Louis Region, 1997-2012

Sources: *St. Louis Business Journal* [website], <http://www.bizjournals.com/stlouis/>; *Riverfront Times (RFT)* [website], <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/>; American Public Transportation Association (APTA) [website], <http://www.apta.com>; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* [website], <http://www.stltoday.com/>.

As seen in Table 6, the passage in 2010 of Proposition A (the half-cent sales tax to fund transit) meant success where the similar 2008 Proposition M failed, and demonstrates the success of St. Louis Metro Transit's more recent public involvement and campaign strategies, which also included the use of surveys to receive feedback on the public's priorities in matters of transit, and to disseminate important information about transit, in particular to inform the public of long-range transit plans. As seen in Table 2, the agency received an award in 2011 from the International Association of Public Participation for the agency's efforts to involve and inform the public during its campaign to publicize its Moving Transit Forward plan.

A key element in the success of media and public opinion efforts in the St. Louis region appears to be the proactive ground game in the campaign for the 2010 Proposition A vote. During our team visit (St. Louis, October 2012), Dianne Williams, Director of Communications at Metro St. Louis, emphasized the high priority of communicating with the public from a grassroots perspective, with local community members and leaders involved in the campaign. Three items were pointed out by Metro Transit personnel as critical in the agency's relationship with the public:

- A regional vision.
- The divulging of data showing the impact/benefits of transit to people.
- Clarity about the plan outcomes portrayed to the public.

Atlanta

Similar to other American cities, Atlanta's transit history began with streetcars as a primary form of transportation, prior to World War II.⁴⁷ In 1965, Atlanta unified all its transportation services under the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) in order to compete with the influx of automobiles. In 1998, Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) was created to improve the state's mobility, and in 2003 a rapid and free shuttle service called "the BUC" (Buckhead Community Improvement District) started operations.

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, Atlanta's community and neighborhood groups embraced anti-highway sentiments. Additionally, our research suggests that racial issues were critical and influenced opinions and level of support for public transit. It can be inferred that partly due to these issues, the educational campaign conducted in 1968 by MARTA failed.⁴⁸ At the same time, in the 1980s, during the administration of a new mayor (Andrew Young), in a moment of political shift of the city, two major highway projects were built, despite neighborhood opposition. In the following years, MARTA did not perform as it promised.

Regional changes have taken place in recent times, when a transit-oriented development (TOD) program called BeltLine, included in the 25-year mobility plan (2005-2030), was requested to ensure equally distributed transportation services to neighborhoods affected by transit development and to ensure government funding.⁴⁹ More recently, the agency has engaged in public participation efforts and reached out to media, as illustrated in the most recent annual reports available through MARTA's website.⁵⁰ Table 3 includes an overview of major historic and media events.

Table 3. Major Historic Transit and Media Events, Atlanta Region, 1960-2012

Year	Event	Media And Public Opinion Efforts
1960	Downtown Atlanta population begins decades-long steady decrease.	
1965	Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) is formed.	Voters are allowed to accept or reject MARTA rail transit system. Only City of Atlanta, and Fulton and DeKalb Counties approve MARTA referendum.
1968		Initial plan for MARTA fails "due to negative pluralities in black neighborhoods of Atlanta as well as in the suburbs."
1970	Passenger rail service discontinued. The old rail station receives a makeover.	Anti-highway sentiments mobilize neighborhoods to voice opposition.
1971	MARTA launched in Atlanta; representing a turning point for the city.	
1973		Election of first Black mayor (Maynard Jackson) is the result of mobilization of community movements. New plan for MARTA serves mainly Black neighborhoods and includes bus improvements, expansion of services and reduced fares.
1980	Construction of MARTA rapid transit line.	
1980s	During administration of new mayor (Andrew Young) two major highway projects are built; despite neighborhood opposition; MARTA does perform as it promises.	
1998	Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) is created to coordinate transportation planning and funding with air quality and land use.	
2003	Buckhead Community Improvement District, "the Buc", starts operations.	
2005	Atlanta's 25-years mobility plan published.	BeltLine program is part of the 25-year mobility plan, a comprehensive revitalization program and Atlanta's greatest public outreach program.
2007	Atlanta is now least densely populated metropolitan area in the United States.	
2009	Atlanta is serviced by Amtrak passenger rail service.	
2012	Failed T-SPLOST transportation funding ballot initiative.	

Sources: Underground Atlanta, "History of Underground Atlanta" (2012), <http://underground-atlanta.com/history/history-of-underground> (accessed December 21, 2012); Oliver Clifton, "Atlanta's transportation history," *Examiner*, November 9, 2009, <http://www.examiner.com/article/atlanta-s-transportation-history> (accessed December 21, 2012).

Among the methods used by the agency to engage people in the decision process are the following: public meetings, website information, online surveys, phone surveys, and media relations. Compared to other regions, such as St. Louis or Cleveland, MARTA's website is not very active and includes only a few news releases. For instance, only seven news releases were published on MARTA's website in 2011, while other regions published approximately 100 news releases during that same year. A peak in news releases was seen in 2009, when Amtrak passenger rail service started between Atlanta and Washington, DC, and New Orleans, LA. Figure 8 includes details on press releases numbers across regions.

Other media tools engaged by MARTA to reach out to people are social media such as Facebook (11,633 followers), Twitter (2,284 followers), and YouTube (97 followers). All data were retrieved on December 15, 2012. Figure 9 provides a comparison of social media engagement across regions.

Atlanta has been for long time characterized by a lack of transit vision, economic and financial interests, and heavy investments in highways. All these factors contributed to the creation of an inefficient transportation system.⁵¹ While becoming one of the great metropolises of the U.S., Atlanta has been lacking community interconnections and public infrastructure that could adequately support transportation needs.⁵²

Other issues, which seem to be crucial for transit support, relate to the strong urban-suburban dichotomy characterizing the region. Suburban residents, and their suburban interests, saw high costs and modest benefits as outcomes of the first MARTA plan.⁵³ Involvement efforts conducted at the time (from years 2004 through 2005) were largely ineffective and failed to appropriately target diverse groups.

Similarly, the most recent 2012 special-purpose local-option sales tax (T-SPLOST) failed vote (i.e., one percent sale tax referendum for transportation funding)⁵⁴ is also related to the diversity of regional interests and the ineffective campaign, unable to speak to all groups (interview to agency personnel during the Atlanta October 2012 visit). An interesting graphic, released by the Atlanta Regional Commission (reproduced here as Figure 6), shows the regional divide between the city core and the counties in the regional context in the vote, where the inner core residents largely supported public transit, while the suburbs opposed the referendum to fund transit. In the figure, the percent voting yes is mapped by region, and a gradient pattern can be easily detected ranging from the city to the suburbs. A "wish list" type of approach to the plan process, where the different counties asked for specific transportation projects and inflated the potential budget to unrealistic levels, hindered communication and cooperation between the transit agency and diverse groups in the region. Issues of racial diversity, urban-suburban interests and even perceptions of crime levels connected with transit affected public opinion on the T-SPLOST vote. A poll conducted by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) in 2011 found that 42 percent of respondents thought that mass transit would promote crime, as Ariel Hart reported in an AJC article.⁵⁵

In the recent 2012 T-SPLOST referendum campaign, media (mostly videos) suggests that the key message targeted issues related to the high congestion levels in the city, versus communicating a strong vision and cohesive region-wide plan. As suggested by Harry West,

a researcher at Georgia Technological University (and former director for the metropolitan planning agency for Atlanta), local media seems to be open to spokespersons from pro and anti-groups, giving room to all with an open access approach.⁵⁶ At the same time, articles appear to often include confrontational tones and heighten conflict rather than promoting the visibility of compromises or moderate positions about transit-related issues.

There is no effective transit advocacy group in Atlanta, as stated by MARTA personnel during our transit team's visit on October 22, 2012. Existing transit advocacy organizations are weak. Notable advocacy organizations include Pedestrians Educating Drivers (PEDs); Atlanta Bicycle Coalition; Transit Riders Union (no longer active); Citizens for Progressive Transit; Livable Community Coalition (funding issues); and Georgia Public Policy Foundation (that favors only bus rapid transit (BRT)).

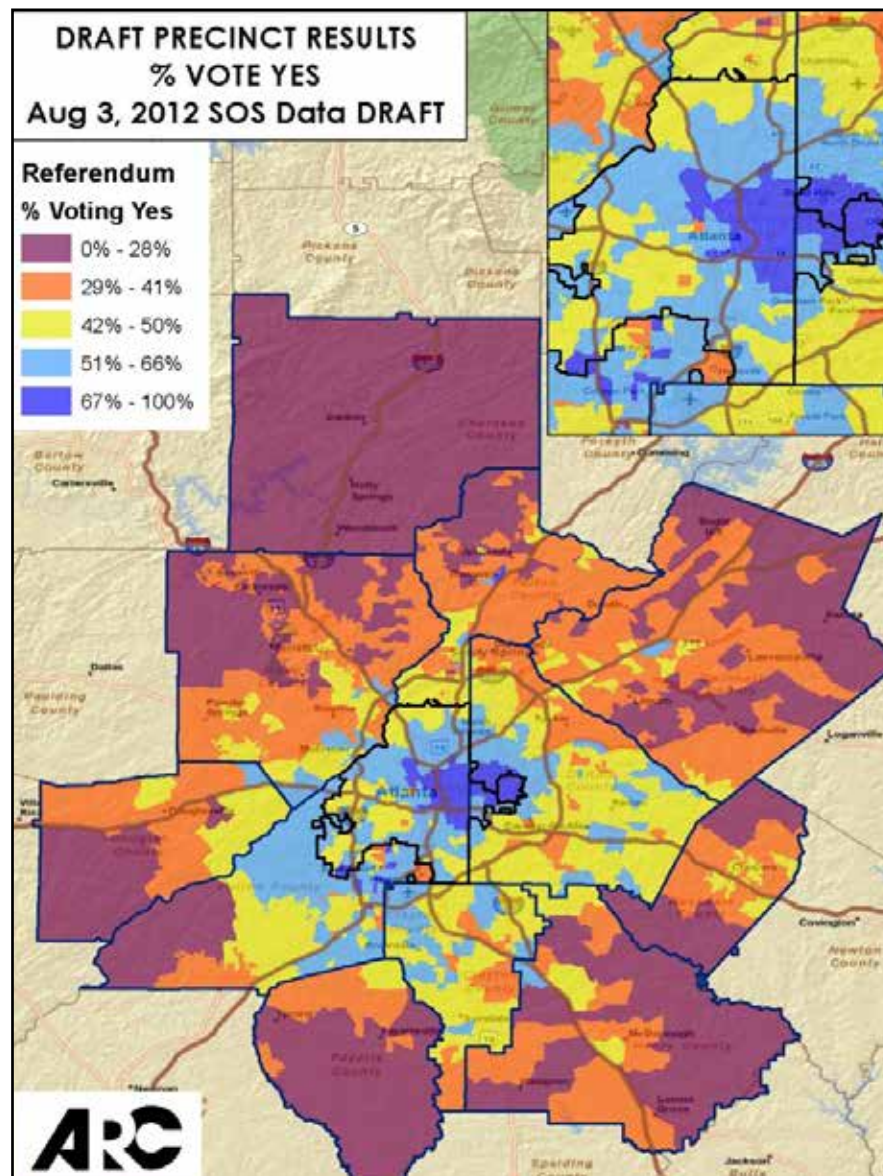


Figure 6. Graphic of the Vote by Precinct, Provided by the Atlanta Regional Commission

Source: *Regional Transportation Referendum* [website] (July 31, 2012), <http://www.metroatlantatransportationvote.com/>. (accessed December 21, 2013).

Denver

A list of major transit events and media strategies in the development of a regional transit system in Denver was compiled through literature review and online research (Table 4). Regional Transportation District (RTD), one of the largest transit agencies in U.S., was established in 1969 and consolidated in 1974. Since 1997, RTD appears to have been strongly engaged in public involvement during planning and expansion programs. As seen in Table 4, the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) and the FasTracks program have been characterized by the extensive public involvement initiatives. Studies for a master plan, expansion programs and improvements continued until 2004, with strong public participation.

As stated in the RTD 2011 annual report on FasTracks, the agency ensures internal and external communication during each phase of the program implementation using two major tools: the Public Information Strategic Planning and the Communications Program Implementation:⁵⁷

A Strategic Public Information Plan serves as the overarching approach to program-wide public information and outreach... The FasTracks Public Information Team communicates and engages internal and external stakeholders through seven strategic Communication Programs: Internal Relations, Public Involvement, Public Outreach, Government Relations, Media Relations, Issues Management and Crisis Communications.

In 2011, the public opinion efforts undertaken by the agency in order to inform, educate, and involve the public included:⁵⁸

- Public education campaigns using a variety of tools such as newspaper ads, bus and light rail ads, banners, social media, and outdoor advertising with quick and simple messages.
- The “Call to the People,” a two-week campaign to inform the public of a sales tax increase vote. This used community newspaper advertising, social media, a video and an online survey.
- T3 Industry Forum to encourage proposals on how to complete the FasTracks transit expansion program quickly and with reduced cost of agency’s operations.
- Telephone Town Halls, a new method of public outreach through telephone town hall meetings. RTD reached more than 400,000 people.
- Annual FasTracks Public Opinion Survey, which provided RTD with helpful insights on public perceptions about the agency and the transit expansion program.
- Information materials to inform and educate the people about FasTracks, including a general FasTracks brochure, the *Transit Times District Newsletter*, project fact sheets, and program brochures.

- Photo/Video documentation showing the progress of FasTracks.
- Video education to help inform the public about the progress of the program.

Table 4. Major Historic Transit and Media Events, Denver Region, 1969-2012

Year	Events	Media and Public Opinion Efforts
1969	RTD begins operations.	
1970s	First plan for mass transit is published.	
1973	RTD seeks voter approval to collect sales taxes to finance its local share in design, construction and operation of multimodal transit system. 57.2% of voters approve ballot proposal for 0.5% sales tax to support \$425M in revenue bonds.	
1975		March 21, RTD unveils a new brand for its transit services - The RIDE.
1978	RTD and U.S. Department of Transportation's Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA) sponsor "Free Fare Project" to give passengers free rides during off peak hours in a region-wide effort to address air quality issues.	Ridership increases 45% during free fare periods. When fare collection resumes in February 1979 66% of riders are retained.
1994	Downtown Express/High-Occupancy Vehicle lanes open to buses. Light rail begins service.	
1997	Failed ballot initiative "Guide the Ride." Voters reject (58%-42%) plan to build additional light and commuter rail lines and provide better bus service and high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes around the metro area. Plan passes in Denver but is rejected in suburbs and Boulder County.	
1997-2000	RTD, the City and Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) cooperate with Union Station Transport Development Company (USTDC), private landowners and businesses to create Central Platte Valley Light Rail Spur (C-Line), a major public transit connection to Denver Union Station.	Major Investment Study (MIS) for West Corridor is completed; concludes that LRT along the old Associated Railroad and Denver Interurban Transit Line adjacent to 13th Ave. provides the most transportation benefit with the fewest negative impacts to the community. This alignment, known as the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA), is based on input from neighborhood residents, businesses and local elected officials, and adopted by RTD Board and later DRCOG.
2000	RTD's second light rail line (SW Corridor Line) opens to immediate success. Ridership on the line more than doubles projections. In November, FTA awards \$525M Full Funding Grant Agreement to RTD for the transit elements of the massive \$1.67 billion Transportation Expansion (T-REX) collaboration with Colorado DOT.	
2001		Finished product of LPA study is EIS. Throughout EIS public involvement process, RTD holds over 158 meetings, including public meetings and small group briefings. Final EIS is submitted to the FTA in late 2003.
2002	Denver Union Station project team is initiated by the CCD, RTD, CDOT and DRCOG, known as the Partner Agencies to develop a Master Plan.	
2004	Denver Union Station Master Plan is approved by each of the Partner Agencies. Voters of RTD approve FasTracks plan, one of the largest single mass transit expansion programs in the country. During this time the economy continues to spiral downward.	Public is extensively involved during design of FasTracks program through Urban Design Committee and Public Meetings, as well as small group meetings. FasTrack Yes! Campaign is successful and FasTrack is approved.

Year	Events	Media and Public Opinion Efforts
2006		Denver Union Station Draft EIS (DEIS) is released for public review and comment.
2008	Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) is completed in compliance with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other regulations and statutes. October 17, FTA signs Denver Union Station Record of Decision (ROD) confirming that construction of proposed transit improvements may proceed. Denver Union Station Master Plan Supplement is approved by Partner Agencies to update information about proposed treatment of various transportation and development elements.	City develops 2008 Strategic Transportation Plan to respond to public calls of Blueprint Denver process: public conversations and workshops are held to promote idea of building "Living Streets."
2011		February 4, Amtrak temporarily relocates to Denver's Prospect Neighborhood. Station is accessible to passengers with disabilities, offers Quik-Trak® self-serve ticketing, free WiFi, snack/beverage vending machines, free parking for passengers with validation.
2012		May 18, DUSPA and RTD hold lunch time event to officially open Denver Union Station Light Rail Plaza. In conjunction with the opening, officials hold a photo contest.

Sources: Denver Streetcars, "One Lifetime. Generations of Memories. A Timeline of Streetcar Service in Denver" (August 2008), <http://www.denverstreetcars.net/history.htm> (accessed December 21, 2012); Denver Union Station Project Authority, "Denver Union Station History and Timeline," http://www.denverunionstation.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3&Itemid=4 (accessed December 21, 2012); Regional Transportation District, "Project History" (2011), http://www.rtd-fastracks.com/wc_3 (accessed December 21, 2012).

RTD uses a variety of tools to involve and inform the residents and service users about public transit decisions and system news. RTD has its own website with a News Release Archive⁵⁹ starting with January 2011 and a monthly Newsletter⁶⁰ starting from June 2012.

RTD FasTracks website also has a News Release Archive,⁶¹ even though information available only covers the year 2012; it is necessary to contact the agency in order to have access to previous press releases. The FasTracks website has its own regularly updated daily Newsroom that contains information about the program and its improvement and development projects.⁶² The website also includes the *Inside FasTracks* e-newsletter, a monthly e-newsletter distributed the last Monday of each month to key stakeholders to keep them informed about FasTracks progress. Finally, it is also possible to find the latest articles from other magazines through FasTracks' "In the News" portal.⁶³

The FasTracks Public Information (PI) Team promotes a good working relationship with media organizations. Annual visits with local media organizations and community newspapers are conducted to provide information on FasTracks and give the media an opportunity to ask questions about the program. As stated in the RTD 2011 annual report:⁶⁴

[The] team also kicked off a FasTracks Media Working Group with representatives of local media entities to get feedback on the elements of FasTracks of most interest to them, their readers, viewers and listeners, and how the PI Team can best serve them as our media partners.

Figure 7 is an overview of major magazines coverage on RTD. As seen in this figure there has been an overall rising trend in the local news coverage in recent years, which has paralleled the increase in public involvement and media engagement by RTD. Figure 9 includes a comparison of engagement in social media by region.

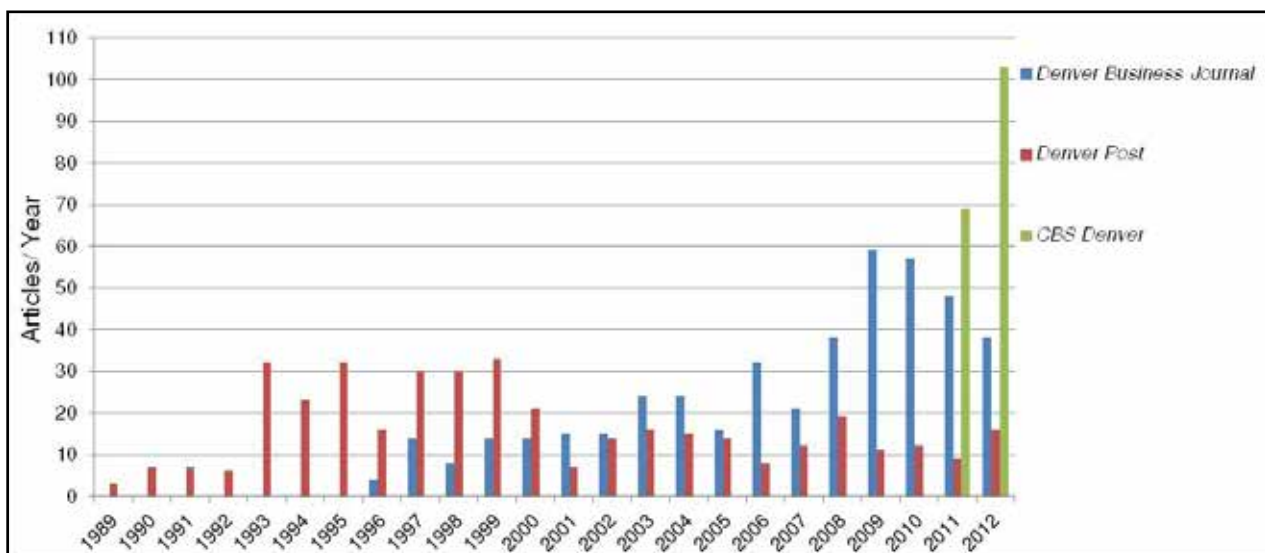


Figure 7. Local News Coverage on Transit in the Denver Region, 1989-2012

Source: *Denver Business Journal* [website], <http://www.bizjournals.com/denver/>; *Denver Post* [website], <http://www.denverpost.com/>; CBS Denver [website for local CBS television affiliate], <http://denver.cbslocal.com/>.

Findings from this research indicate that public involvement efforts and media initiatives are strong in the Denver region. Overall, this region has developed a regional Metro Vision, through a process initiated by RTD in collaboration with local jurisdictions and the public. A good example of key long-range public opinion effort is the process RTD initiated after the failed 1997 *Guide the Ride* vote, a measure to pass a tax increase for transportation funding.⁶⁵

Following the unsuccessful 1997 “Guide the Ride” (GRT) campaign, the region decided to administer surveys to understand the reasons for this failure. Survey results showed that voters perceived the plan to be too expensive and designed by experts with little community involvement.⁶⁶ In response, the Transit Alliance was formed (with local officials, businessmen and environmentalists) in order to create a new referendum campaign to propose a 0.4 percent sales tax increase. As a result of this process, Denver was very effective in 2004 in persuading voters to approve decisions related to public transit and to support TOD.⁶⁷ More details on campaigns are included in the final section of this report.

The growth-oriented cohesive regional vision, which translated into the FasTrack plan and TOD, was enhanced through good communication with the public and public involvement in the planning process. In an effort to support the regional vision, the City of Denver spearheaded a significant public involvement process, called Blueprint Denver. The public involvement process engaged residents through public conversations and workshops that promoted public transit and pedestrian-friendly development. The result was the development of the *2008 Strategic Transportation Plan (STP)*.⁶⁸

Comparisons between the Four Regions

Three key overarching themes emerge from the findings:

1. The centrality of a good transit image.
2. The importance of educating the public and media about transit.
3. The critical nature of appropriate strategies for educational campaigns in view of key transit events (e.g., a vote).

Findings are discussed in the final recommendations section of this report. Figure 8 and Figure 9 show comparisons of news releases and of social media engagement levels across regions. Table 5 is a summary of all findings, while Table 6 is an overview of major campaign efforts per region.

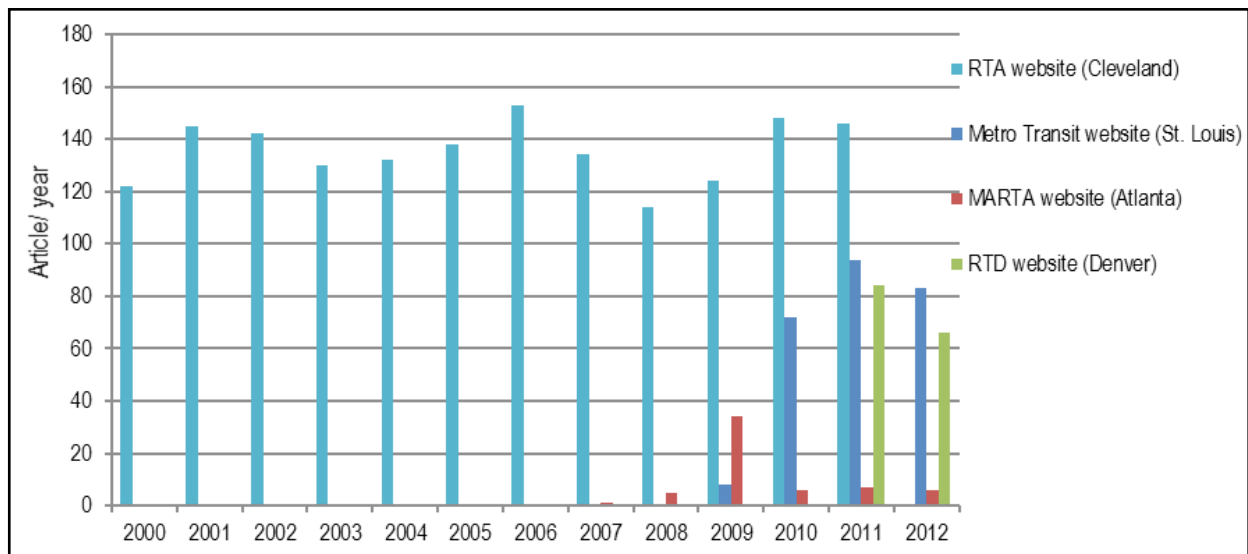


Figure 8. Numbers of News Releases on Agency Websites in Four Regions, 2000-2012

Sources: GCRTA, "News & Updates: Newsroom," <http://www.riderta.com/newsroom/>. St. Louis Metro website, <http://www.metrostlouis.org/>; MARTA, "Press Releases," <http://www.itsmarta.com/Press-Releases.aspx>; RTD, "FasTracks Newsroom," http://www.rtd-fastracks.com/main_18 (accessed December 15, 2012).

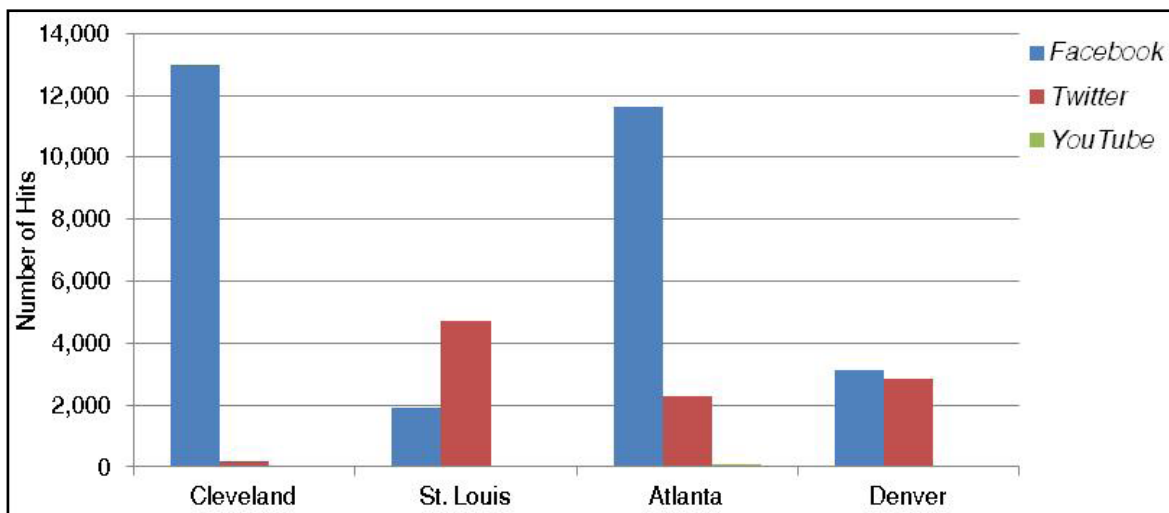


Figure 9. Comparison of Level of Engagement in Social Media in the Four Regions

Source: Twitter RTA, <http://twitter.com/gcrtapnr>; Facebook GCRTA, <http://www.facebook.com/riderta>; YouTube RTA, <http://www.youtube.com/user/GreaterClevelandRTA/videos?flow=grid&view=0> (accessed December 15, 2012). Facebook Metro, <http://www.facebook.com/STLMetro>; Twitter Metro, <http://twitter.com/STLMetro>; YouTube Metro, <http://www.youtube.com/MetroStLouisTransit> (accessed December 15, 2012). Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/MARTA/64214098113>; Twitter MARTA, <http://twitter.com/MARTAMARKETING>; Youtube MARTA, <http://www.youtube.com/user/itsmartanews?feature=nmhum> (accessed December 15, 2012). Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/RideRTD>; Twitter, <http://twitter.com/RideRTD>; YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/user/rideRTDco> (accessed December 15, 2012).

Table 5. Summarized Findings by Region

Region	Findings
Cleveland	• Importance of a branding approach to transit that is captured and amplified by media. • Visibility of a key project/corridor and its effect in uplifting the entire agency's image. • Strengths of public-private partnerships in promoting increased awareness of transit benefits to the public. • Importance of the ability of transit leaders to communicate with media. • Payoff and importance of good public engagement efforts and engagement through social media and internet.
St. Louis	• Importance of educating media and educating the public. • Effectiveness of good on-the-ground educational and public participation work that targets diverse groups. • Importance of clarity in communicating plans to community members. • Importance of transit advocacy groups alignment (and consistency when conducting a campaign with the agency). • Importance of support by local media.
Atlanta	• Openness of media outlets to diverse positions and interest groups can be critical. • Importance of interacting with diverse stakeholder groups to build transit support (low level of interaction contributed to the failure of the 2012 campaign). • Lack of clarity in future vision and plan is captured by media and amplified, giving voice to frustration and criticism. • Educational/advocacy transit campaigns should concentrate on positive future visions that resonate with diverse groups.
Denver	• Effectiveness of public involvement programs in ensuring visibility and support for transit. • Importance of communicating to the public via internet and with social media. • Effectiveness of grassroots processes (e.g., petition approach before the vote) in promoting awareness of transit initiatives and their benefits. • Effectiveness of an educational strategy that targets media as well as the public.

Campaign efforts in comparable regions were studied. Table 6 shows an overview of major campaign efforts per region. Of note is Atlanta's 2012 failed T-SPLOST measure to raise a one percent sales tax to fund transit. Details can be found in the original report.⁶⁹ Overall, the following elements distinguish the loss in Atlanta:

- Public perception of lack of clarity of plan due to mixed road project, funding allocations, and priorities.
- Wish list approach that jeopardized public stakeholders' involvement and support.
- Low plan endorsement, also due to unresolved racial/socio-demographic issues.
- Ineffective education of media.
- The 2012 T-SPLOST campaign failed to portray a positive vision (mostly concentrated on mitigation of negative aspects of transit such as traffic).

As an opposite case study to the T-SPLOST approach to an educational campaign, an excellent example of effective campaign messaging that focused on positive outcomes and proposed new optimistic perspective on transit and its future to the public can be seen in the Salt Lake campaign designed by R&R Partners and presented by Kyle Curtis, Creative Director, R&R Partners in a lecture entitled "Messaging for Transit Referenda: Experiences Across the Nation"⁷⁰ at the University of Detroit Mercy Transit Workshop in May 2013.⁷¹

Table 6. Recent Campaigns, St. Louis, Atlanta and Denver Regions

Region	Description	Campaign Characteristics
St. Louis	Proposition M (2008) ½-cent Sales Tax Ballots: 562,965 48.45% YES votes. Proposition fails.	• Citizens for Better Transportation (CBT) and political consultants close to County Executive Dooley organize campaign. • CBT is not able to raise significant funds. • Metro Transit engages in community meetings and outreach outlining potential cuts if funding is not approved. • CMT forms Greater St. Louis Transit Alliance. • African American community is not well represented by Transit Alliance, nor reached by CBT. • Considerable voter drop-off, as 48,849 do not vote on the final ballot. • Many do not believe that cuts will really occur if proposition not passed.
	Proposition A (2010) ½-cent Sales Tax Ballots: 151,613 62.9% YES votes. Proposition passes.	• County Executive Dooley supports tax initiative (2009). • John Nations, Republican Mayor of Chesterfield, agrees to run the Advance St. Louis (the “Vote YES on A” campaign). • CMT sponsors educational campaign before the Vote YES on A campaign starts. • Off-year election. • Get-out-the-vote strategy.
Denver	“Guide the Ride” (1997) 0.4% Sales Tax 42% YES votes. Measure fails.	• Public perception of “expert-derived” plan with no connection to local needs. • Confused plan due to several add-ons. • Perceived vagueness and inflated size (determining high costs).
	Proposition 4A FastTrack Yes! (2004) 1% Sales Tax 57% YES votes Proposition passes.	• Effective public involvement programs ensure visibility and support for transit. • Importance of communicating to the public via internet/social media. • Effective grassroots processes (e.g., petition approach before the vote) promote awareness of transit initiatives and their benefits. • Effective educational strategy targeting media as well as the public.
Atlanta	T-SPLOST Measure (2012) 1% Sales Tax 9 of 12 regional districts vote NO. Measure fails.	• Metro Atlanta invests \$8M on education and advocacy. • Campaign perceived as top-down and fails to attract key groups/organizations. • Vote reflects split between Atlanta and suburbs (59% of city residents vote in favor, but 63% of outlying districts vote against). • Lack of clarity in future vision and plan is captured by media and amplified, giving voice to frustration and criticism. • Campaign does not concentrate on positive future visions that resonate with diverse groups, and does not adequately address needs of African American suburban communities (e.g., south DeKalb community). Democratic-leaning, predominantly African American counties vote against. • Error of allowing a politically narrow (conservative) businessmen to run a funding campaign to appeal to the entire range of stakeholders.

Sources: Center for Transportation Excellence, “Transportation Ballot Measures,” <http://www.ctfe.org/elections/past> (accessed December 23, 2013).

Institute for Sustainable Communities. “Fastracks and transit-oriented development – integrating land-use and transportation planning to transform a city. [website] 2010. http://www.iscvt.org/resources/documents/denver_fastracks.pdf (accessed December 21, 2012). Ciruli associates. “RTD’s tax history.” [website] 2000. <http://www.ciruli.com/archives/oppose2.htm> (accessed December 21, 2012). Swannstrom, Todd, Kimball, David, and Shrout, Tom. “Lessons from the Passage of Prop A Public Policy Research Center.” 2011. <http://pprc.umsl.edu/data/PropALessons.pdf> (accessed December 21, 2012).

Overall, the capability of transit agencies/authorities to conduct their work transparently and to portray their work with clarity to the public is critical. Trust-building is at the basis of a strong regional transit image, as well as the rebranding of the agency/authority to

effectively rebuild a new positive transit image, in the case of past transit failures. Findings suggest that the following elements, have been key to the success of transit campaigns in the comparable regions:

- Implementing a pre-campaign ground-action effort to widen support (e.g., a petition versus an immediate ballot) to educate the public on general transit issues.
- Emphasizing efforts of grassroots educational efforts in collaboration with local community leaders, civic groups, advocacy groups (with a local person or “transit champion”) that are captured by media.
- Presenting/advertising a clear and coherent vision for the plan/initiative (versus a list of projects or an overpromising prediction), including clear plan restrictions, from the beginning of the process (including visually mapping and explaining the plan).
- Conducting public opinion surveys before the campaign to understand public perceptions, and during the campaign to gear messages to the public’s expectations and opinions and to portray benefits of transit to the public.
- Addressing issues of diversity in stakeholder groups/population groups (in particular urban versus suburban interests).
- Negotiating and communicating/advertising a shared vision (versus a collection of individual interests).
- Involving marketing and political consultants to guide the campaign process and work with media.

KEY PUBLIC OPINION AND INVOLVEMENT EFFORTS AND MEDIA INITIATIVES IN THE DETROIT REGION

This study sought to analyze past and current public opinion efforts in the Detroit region to understand the relationship between transit agencies, advocacy groups and local media, and to understand the characteristics of public involvement and outreach efforts in the region.

Detroit: History

Key transit events from the establishment of Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) in 1967 to the year 2007 were identified. A brief overview of major transit events is shown in Table 7. We chose 2007 as the threshold to “contemporary” transit events and public opinion efforts, since in that year a major new transit initiative (which is still very much a contemporary issue in 2012) was launched. The years between 2007 and 2012 are shown in Table 8 and discussed later in this section.

Table 7. Major Historic Transit Events, Detroit Region, 1967-2006

Year	Events
1967	Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) is formed to take over the financially strapped private companies operating suburban mass transit services in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties.
1969	Detroit Regional Transportation and Land Use Study (TALUS) recommends rail rapid transit in eight major region corridors. There is no follow-up.
1974	The Department of Street Railways (DSR) is reorganized as the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT).
1976	President Gerald Ford offers Southeast Michigan \$600 million to build a rail transit system. Other than "People Mover" (1987), nothing else is developed due to the lack of local/regional support.
1979	SEMTA approves a regional transit plan but subsidies are cut and the plans are never implemented. SEMTA soon reduce transit service.
1983	SEMTA eliminates commuter rail from Pontiac to Detroit.
1984	SEMTA eliminates commuter rail from Ann Arbor to Detroit. Regional leaders approve the <i>Regional Public Transportation Consensus Plan</i> , a refined version of the 1979 <i>Regional Transit Plan</i> . The plan is never implemented.
1987	The "PeopleMover" downtown transit line is built, at \$67 million per mile.
1989	The Regional Transit Coordinating Council (RTCC) is formed in an effort to provide efficient public transportation in Southeast Michigan. SEMTA is reorganized without the city of Detroit and renamed the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART).
1994	SMART and DDOT attempt to merge five routes, but the project is cancelled.
1996	SMART and DDOT establish a common regional bus pass. Further attempts to merge services fail.
1997	Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) suggests re-establishing commuter rails at \$2 million per mile, which is considered to be too expensive by regional leaders.
1998	DDOT terminates its suburban service. SMART picks up the abandoned routes.
1999	General Motors removes the commuter rail spur that is west of Renaissance Center to make room for a parking deck. MDOT expands I-375 towards the river. The effect of both actions eliminates downtown rail access. \$10 million cuts in funding as incentive for SMART and DDOT to combine services.
2001	Detroit Regional Chamber spearheads legislation to create a Detroit Regional Transportation Authority (DARTA).
2002	Legislation to form DARTA is vetoed by Governor John Engler. SMART millage is increased from .33 mi. to .59 mi. and successfully passes in all three counties.
2003	DARTA is formed through an inter-local intergovernmental agreement (IGA) with powers, functions, responsibilities and authority essential to providing quality public transportation, but it needs the consent of Michigan municipalities. SEMCOG convenes the transit impediments committee of elected officials.
2005	SEMCOG announces it will conduct study to evaluate the opportunity to develop an Ann Arbor to Detroit commuter line that would include a stop at/by Metropolitan Airport, consolidating two previous studies.
2006	Michigan State Supreme Court decision dissolves DARTA and IGA. RTCC hires CEO John Hertel to direct mass transit program in Southeast Michigan: Detroit Regional Mass Transit Project. DDOT initiates the Detroit Transportation Options for Growth Study (DTOGS).

Sources: SmartBus, "History of Transit in Southeast Michigan Region," SmartBus (2013), <http://www.smartbus.org/aboutus/overview/Pages/History-of-Transit-in-Southeast-Michigan-Region.aspx> (accessed January 30, 2014); Andrews, W. Earle, 1945, Detroit Expressway and Transit System prepared for Detroit Transportation Board, New York; Hyde, Charles K. "Planning a transportation system for metropolitan Detroit in the age of the automobile: the triumph of the expressway." Michigan Historical Review 32.1 (2006): 59+. Academic OneFile. Web. 4 May 2012. Perry, Jeffrey M. 2010. Contextual transit [electronic resource], from <<http://archives.udmercy.edu:8080/dspace/handle/10429/215>>.

Articles from all news sources typically implied that people perceive mass transit quite positively and believe that it is a key factor in reviving the city of Detroit and the surrounding region. More commonly, there have been disagreements among groups and communities regarding specific plans or proposals for mass transit. These disagreements have played a role in preventing progress. Individual events were studied more closely and coverage was analyzed to detect supportive or opposing orientations towards transit issues and initiatives. Figure 10 shows a comparison of the volume of positive, negative and neutral articles per media outlet per year. Figure 11 present an overview of articles consulted by magazine and by orientation towards transit.

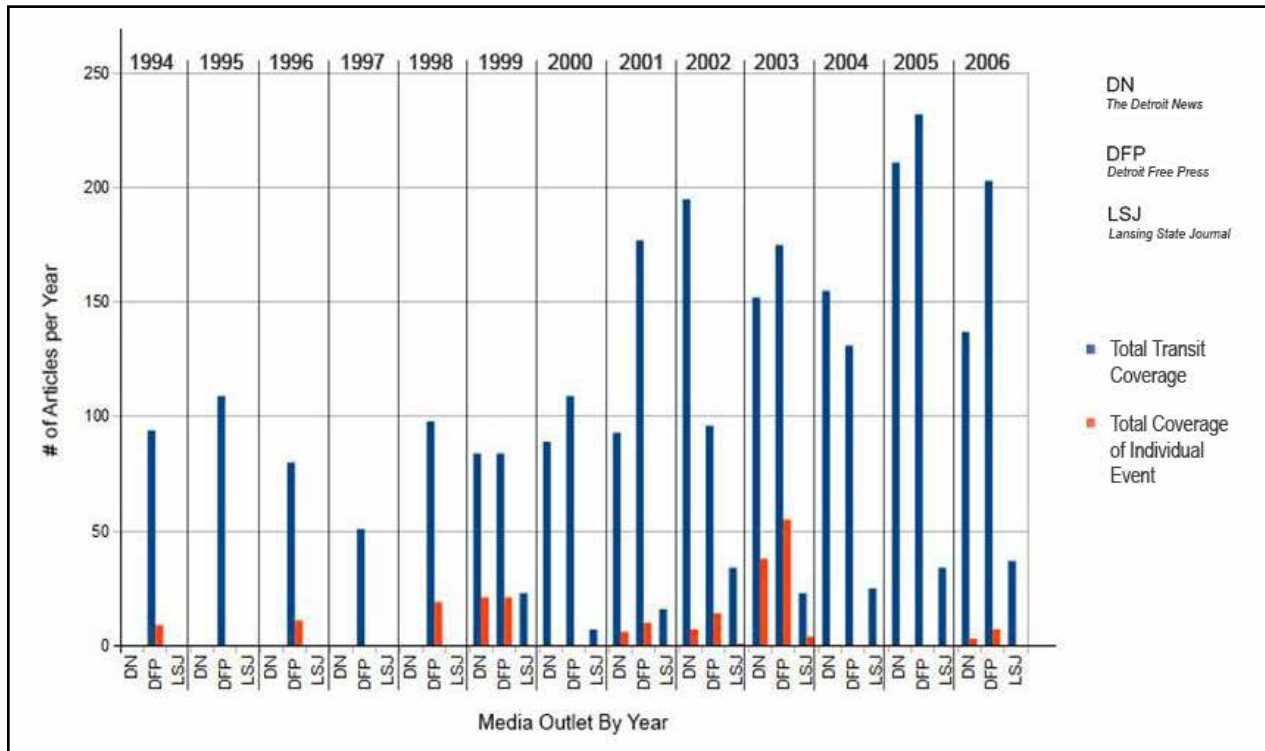


Figure 10. Total Media Coverage per Outlet, Detroit Region, 1994-2006

Sources: Keyword "Transit" used for searches in LexisNexis, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/> and NewsBank, <http://www.newsbank.com/>.

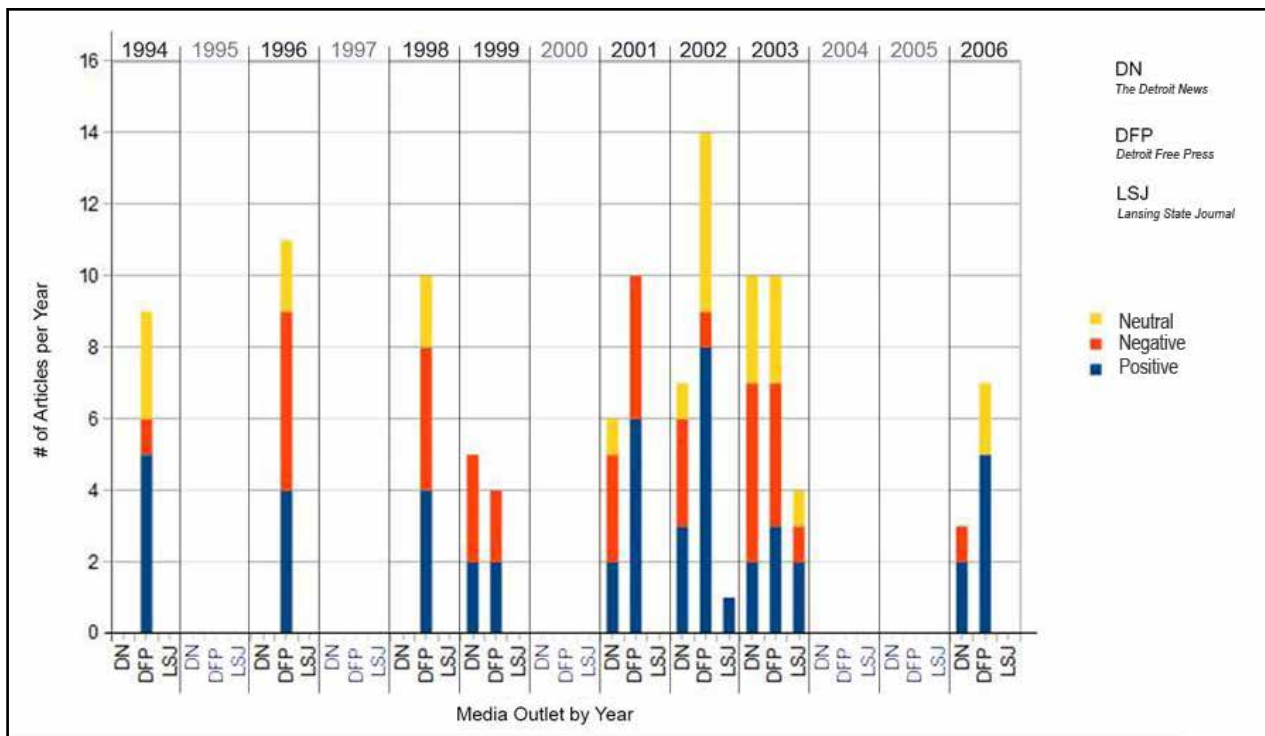


Figure 11. Media Orientation Towards Transit per Outlet, Detroit Region, 1994-2006

Sources: Keyword "Transit" used for searches on LexisNexis, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/> and NewsBank, <http://www.newsbank.com/>.

Overall, certain regional themes in public debates and opinions on transit issues emerged through the analysis of media coverage. In particular, the diversity of positions and interests of a divided region and the political divide created difficulties in agreements, and even more in actual enactment of decisions and plans. The climate and public opinion seems to have been characterized by a sense of disillusion and by public distrust in positive outcomes or successes of transit initiatives, as well as the lack of a regional cohesive vision on transit issues and on what transit means and does for the community at large.

Specific detailed historic case studies investigating media coverage and public opinion regarding transit can be found in the original work.⁷²

Detroit: Current (2007- May 2013)

In the effort to reconstruct the debate around transit in the manner in which it was made visible to the public by print media, the following section of this report was compiled and solely relies on what was reported by print media from 2007 through May 2013. The assumption here, which was also confirmed by Metro Detroit region reporters interviewed by our team, is that print media, to this date, has the capability to shape the general discourse on local events, and influences (in a ripple-like manner) the radio and television communication outlets.⁷³ Therefore, we assume that print media is generally first in "spreading the voice" about a topic, and that the perspective promoted by print media becomes a framework for further communications about the same issues.

As highlighted further in the Recommendations section of this report, the relationship between print media and social media is biunivocal, as information built and dispersed through social media tends to cycle back into print media (or online versions of print media). Nevertheless, our research confirmed that print media and online media articles based on the correspondent print article still lead the conversation, as people engaged in social media tend to read news articles first, and then react to them with personal views and judgments, adding reports based on their direct experience with an issue and their individual perspectives.

Figure 12 displays the total number of articles found in the LexisNexis database using the keyword phrase: “Regional Transit.” Figure 13 displays the total number of local news coverage items reviewed, with article categorization in relation to positive, negative or neutral attitude to key transit initiatives. Table 8 is a list of major transit events in the Metro Detroit region from the year 2007 through May 2013. Articles were retrieved from *Detroit News* (DN), *Detroit Free Press* (DFP), and *Crain’s Detroit Business* (CDB).

As seen in Figure 12, the number of articles rises nearly three-fold in 2011 and peaks in 2012. This coincides with the proposal and passing of the bill to create the Regional Transit Authority (RTA), a hot topic for the region’s transit future. An item to note in Figure 13 is the shift from the negative perspectives of news coverage in 2010 (the year in which the disagreement between the M-1 Rail and the Detroit Transportation Options for Growth Study (DTOGS) project exploded and generated frustration after initial hopes), to the mostly positive views in 2012 (the year in which the Michigan Senate passed the RTA bill).

Another item to note is the discrepancy in orientation (positive, neutral, negative) towards transit issues across news sources within any given year. This discrepancy suggests that media can exact a very diverse impact on the public’s opinion of one source versus another as reporters tell a different story about the same issue, and therefore contribute to the building of support or aversion by the public to transit initiatives in the region. More in depth research is needed to uncover the impact of specific articles on the public.

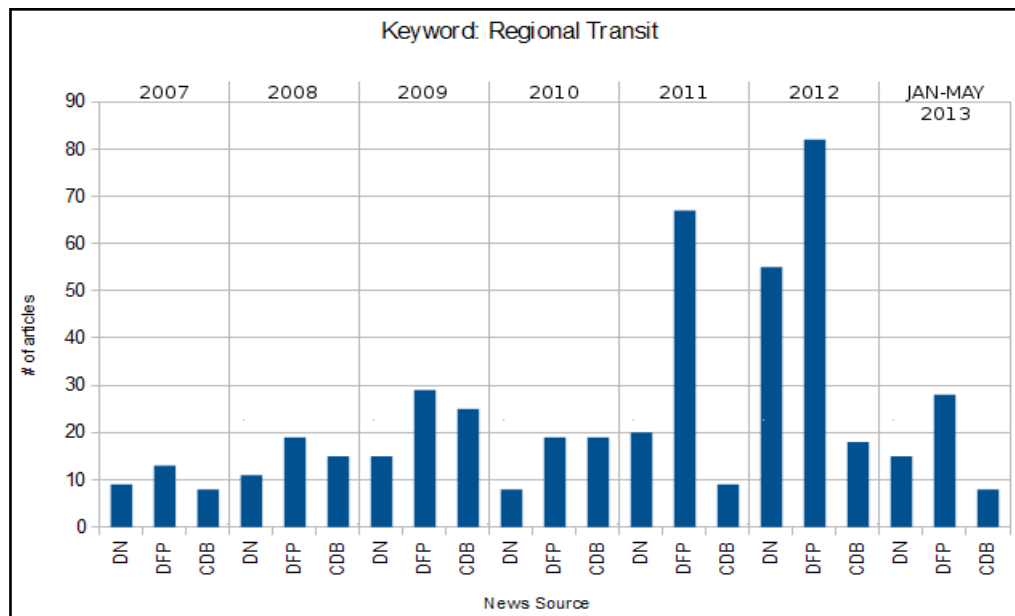


Figure 12. Number of Articles on “Regional Transit” (keyword), Detroit Region, 2007-May 2013

Source: LexisNexis, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/>.

Notes: Keyword: “Regional Transit”

DN: Detroit News

DFP: Detroit Free Press

CBD: Crain’s Detroit Business

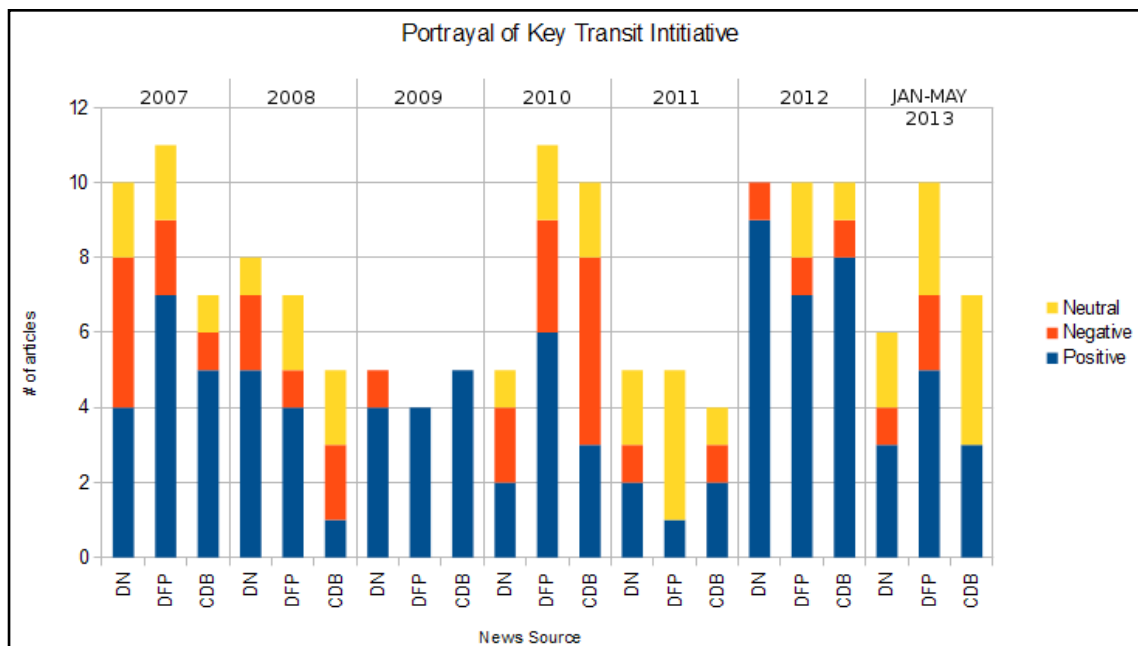


Figure 13. Orientation of Articles Towards Transit Initiatives, Detroit Region, 2007-May 2013

Source: LexisNexis, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/lawschool/>.

Notes: Keyword: “Regional Transit”; Orientation identification based on the analysis of full text articles.

DN: Detroit News

DFP: Detroit Free Press

CBD: Crain’s Detroit Business

Table 8. Major Transit Events, Detroit Region, 2007-May 2013

Year	Events
2007	M1-Rail is formed for the purpose of developing a regional rapid transit system, starting with development of a modern street car service on Woodward Ave.
2008	DDOT, in its DTOGS project, identifies Woodward Ave. as the location for the light rail project. December, RTTC board approves a tri-county multimodal <i>Comprehensive Regional Transit Service Plan</i> prepared by Detroit Regional Mass Transit. The RTTC defines the next steps for the establishment of a RTA and a regional transit funding plan.
2009	SMART purchases two hybrid-electric articulated buses that help accommodate riders along high demand routes while helping the environment. Legislature fails to approve the development of a RTA.
2010	City of Detroit's population drops to 713,777 from 951,270 in 2000 (Max population 1,850,000 in 1950). M1-Rail and DTOGS projects appear to merge into the Woodward Light Rail project. Despite initial agreement on development and funding, disagreements exist concerning alignment of the light rail route.
2011	The City of Detroit cuts DDOT bus operating subsidy and approves a bond issue to help fund Woodward Light Rail's required match. SMART unveils three hybrid-electric buses painted in local university colors. Governor Snyder proposes legislation to form a RTA and provide funding. SMART cuts service by 22% due to lower property values.
2012	Oakland County overwhelmingly passes the SMART millage increase with a 79% approval. November, Michigan Senate passes bills to create a RTA for Southeast Michigan.
2013	Ray LaHood, of the Federal Transit Association, announces \$25 million in federal funds for the private proposal for development of light rail along Woodward Ave. 10 members from Wayne, Macomb, Oakland and Washtenaw Counties appointed to RTA board.

Source: SmartBus, "History of Transit in Southeast Michigan Region," SmartBus [website] (2013), <http://www.smartbus.org/aboutus/overview/Pages/History-of-Transit-in-Southeast-Michigan-Region-.aspx> (accessed January 30, 2014); Jeffrey M. Perry Contextual transit [electronic resource] (2010), <http://archives.udmercy.edu:8080/dspace/handle/10429/215>.

A discussion of key transit events as portrayed by media for the years 2007-May 2013 can be found in the *Current Detroit Transit* report.⁷⁴

Detroit: Transit Agencies

A brief overview of Metro Detroit transit agencies, their relationship with media and their public opinion/involvement strategies is presented in this section. More details can be found in the *Current Detroit Transit* report.⁷⁵

SMART

In the last seven years SMART has engaged with the public through a variety of tools (e.g., public meetings, public outreach activities, online tools, on-board information boards), and has conducted several surveys to understand ridership satisfaction and their interests and needs with regard to transit service. Outreach activities typically intensified closer to the four-year based millage vote.

SMART follows the Public Participation plan by SEMCOG, Southeast Michigan's MPO, though a new plan by SMART is being development as a consequence of the new Title VI regulations.⁷⁶ Participation in transit fairs and the organization of public hearings and meetings provide SMART with feedback from the public that can help the agency improve service. During the time frame in question (2007-2013) public hearings have been publicized

through print media, online media and on-board information. Critical public hearings were held in 2009 and 2011 when fares increased and services were cut. A toll free number and the website provide the public with the opportunity to register feedback to the agency on a regular basis.

Structurally, SMART's communication efforts are concentrated at the local community level. As reported by Beth Gibbons (Manager of Marketing and Communications at SMART), SMART's marketing budget does not allow for mass marketing (such as radio and TV), which is also less appropriate to the "patchwork nature of the SMART service area"; therefore "targeting communities with access to SMART service is a more effective and efficient use of taxpayer dollars."⁷⁷ Efforts are also conducted through word-of-mouth and "relationship building through SMART's County Ombudsmen working in the field helping organizations and municipalities with their transit programs."⁷⁸ As noted by Megan Owens (Director of the Transportation Riders United advocacy group), General Manager John C. Hertel has been very productive about public outreach and public support and his work has been instrumental in providing community transit and increasing mobility of the elderly and disabled across neighborhoods.⁷⁹

Among the strategies used by SMART to reach out to the public are the following: participation in community events and sponsorships directed to local communities, students, seniors and people with disabilities; collaboration with about 117 organizations, including Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES), and Transportation Choices, a consortium of alternative transit providers;⁸⁰ collaboration with the Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to reach out to the Hispanic community as a business partner; and collaboration with the organizations Starfish and L.I.F.T. (Women's Resource Center) to support women's employment.⁸¹

In order to increase access to public transit and to improve efficiency, SMART developed a Community Partnership Program (CPP) in which the agency and the community collaborate to improve quality of services and to fulfill the needs of the community. "Local community representatives and SMART planners identify the community's specific transit needs and design a plan tailored to each community."⁸² Some of the successful traits of this program are: it strengthens community ties with SMART, through locally recruited drivers, and the ability of communities to "fund the CPP program using their SMART Community Credit allocation;"⁸³ and the flexibility of the program ensures a good fit within each community.

SMART launched its new website in 2011.⁸⁴ The home page shows the most visited pages, such as the SMART Trip Planner and the Service Bulletins as well as news, events and service changes. My SMART Program constitutes an important connection for riders to receive pertinent information on routes, weather, special events, service changes, etc., and counts about 9,000 people who are part of the membership.⁸⁵ Live Bus Alert service provides real-time information on bus arrivals, and Calendar of Events informs the public about meetings, public hearings and community events.⁸⁶

What emerged from our study, and was confirmed in our interview with SMART personnel on February 19, 2013,⁸⁷ is that the online presence or digital image of the agency does not give a complete and accurate idea of the variability of engagement and information strategies

conducted by the agency. Additionally, only two annual reports, from 2008 (*Suburban Mobility for Regional Transportation*) and 2009 (*Suburban Mobility for Regional Transportation*), are available online.⁸⁸ Though regular SMART e-newsletters target different user groups, including riders, employees, and CPP's, those unfamiliar with the system do not have a good opportunity to better understand SMART's level of engagement in the community. It can be inferred that reporters and other interested parties do not have sufficient tools to easily acquire and disperse data about outreach and educational efforts by the agency. The lack of visibility of efforts can also damage the image of the agency in the eyes of the general public in Southeast Michigan, which includes a large number of non-riders.

According to Beth Gibbons, the agency maintains a good relationship with most of the key local reporters covering transit issues in the region, such as Tom Greenwood (*Detroit News*) and Matt Helms (*Detroit Free Press*).⁸⁹ Though she admits SMART does not always get positive publicity from media, the agency strives to collaborate with local city newspapers to promote services for the communities.

DDOT

Our team's interview with DDOT personnel in May 2013 suggested that the agency is involved in a few outreach efforts. DDOT personnel emphasized that, despite the lack of any marketing budget, the agency believes it is essential to communicate with the public, and to interact one-on-one with riders and non-riders, in particular in contexts different from hearings (which by nature instead focus on urgent and unsolved problematic issues, and most often result in confrontational communication). Rovella Philips, Manager II at DDOT, and SuVon Treece, Marketing Manager in Customer Relations and Communication at DDOT, indicated that the following outreach programs are considered key in the agency's public opinion strategy: participation in transportation fairs and health fairs, interactions with churches, and school programs, and displays at various events not necessarily related to transit.⁹⁰

In the past, DDOT had larger marketing funds at its disposal, and this allowed for radio and TV marketing, and other key marketing strategies, such as those in connection with sports events in Detroit.⁹¹ The agency has now very limited funds for marketing, and instead focuses on outreach (funded through grants), participating in a number of local outreach/educational events. The Commuter Challenge and Back to School campaigns, which are non-transit-related events, are other ways the agency engages with the public.⁹²

Another campaign the agency is currently working on is the Square One image-building campaign, used to educate the agency's employees in order to help change the image of DDOT.⁹³ This initiative includes targeted slide presentations at bus garages for DDOT drivers and staff to educate employees about DDOT's work and vision at a broader scale, and complements other commitment-boosting initiatives, such as driver and employee of the month. The assumption behind this "internal public opinion campaign" is that perceptions will spill out to the general public from within the agency, as boosting commitment by DDOT employees, and their recognition of the positive role the transit agency can play in the region is expected to improve the overall relationship with the public.

The DDOT website is available through Michigan Department of Transportation or the city of Detroit's official website.⁹⁴ No press releases or annual reports are available online. As DDOT is a city department, information about DDOT's revenues and expenses is available on the City's website as part of the City's overall budget.

There are two notable aspects with regard to the agency's relationship with local print media: the "municipal structure" of interfacing with media; and the historical cautious approach to communicating with the media.⁹⁵ Decision-making in a municipal transit agency must go through numerous interconnected departments, and this is also true for the Customer Relations and Communication Division. Requests need to be approved by different levels including the mayor's office and approvals circulate back before any action can be taken concerning a media issue, a request for information or for an interview.

Historically, DDOT's unwritten policy about communicating with media has been very conservative, with little openness to media "Years back everyone was instructed to stay away from media," though in recent times the city "has opened up more to the media," and the mayor has promoted more frequent press conferences.⁹⁶ The change in communication approach to media is significant, though the image of the agency is slow to change and the collaboration with media can be further improved.

In addition to the two main transit agencies serving the city of Detroit and its immediate suburbs, there are numerous advocacy groups active in the Metro Detroit region directly or indirectly focusing transit. Among the most important groups in terms of public involvement are: Transportation Riders United (TRU), Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES), Transportation for Michigan Coalition (TRANS4M), Michigan Suburbs Alliance, and Downtown Detroit Partnership. Advocacy groups support, especially, those people with disabilities and low-income residents. The hope of these organizations is that the existing Detroit transit agencies will be more involved in public participation and community engagement in the future.⁹⁷ These advocacy groups substantially support and promote public involvement efforts in the region.

In fact, in terms of public involvement some items of note for the Metro Detroit region are:

- MOSES: This group connects congregational institutions, unions, and educational institutions, both in the city and in suburban contexts, and trains groups and communities to represent themselves before policy makers and planners.
- TRU: This group centers its efforts on grassroots organizations and focuses on expanding the communication network and enabling activism.
- Woodward Avenue Rapid Transit Alternatives Analysis (AA): This group provides "an extensive public outreach campaign designed to educate and enlist the involvement of area residents, businesses, and institutions in the process."⁹⁸

A detailed overview of these advocacy groups and of current (2013) public involvement efforts in the field of transit can be found in the *Current Detroit Transit* report.⁹⁹

The Media Perspective

As part of our study, interviews with key local transit reporters were conducted. This allowed us to consider the view of media on transit and the level of understanding, perspective, and insight that media personnel bring to the table of regional public opinion and involvement efforts.

Both Matt Helms (*Detroit Free Press*, interviewed on January 23, 2013) and Bill Shea (*Crain's Detroit Business*, interviewed on February 11, 2013) argued that media is a key player in the regional discourse, and that reporters have a great responsibility to portray to “you,” the public, important themes/topics, and in shaping public opinion. Journalists interview those who are willing to talk and those who make themselves more visible “media is driven by the info derived from the private groups.”¹⁰⁰ Shea argued that journalists need to be skeptical about sources, and are usually able to understand who is a trustworthy source of information and who is not.

From the interviews with Helms and Shea, it became evident that there is a sophisticated and elusive web of news dispersion on which reporters rely.¹⁰¹ Helms stated that much of his research also focuses on reading blogs and Facebook/social media entries, in which the public registers links to more in depth articles or provides information that might not have been available otherwise. Though both reporters agreed that much of the social media/blog conversation is polarized and exaggerated, and that social media influences what the print media will be writing and covering.

The press review conducted on transit-related articles from three major newspapers (*Crain's Detroit Business*, *Detroit Free Press*, and *Detroit News*) for the years between 1994 and 2013 suggests that political issues are embedded into transit issues and that the political core of opinions and perspectives on transit is well captured in the print media. Transit articles written between 2007 and 2013 display an increased coverage of political issues connected to transit. Furthermore, both Rhonda Anderson (Sierra Club)¹⁰² and Joel Batterman (Michigan Suburb Alliance)¹⁰³ mentioned, during our interviews, the disconnection between experts and the public, and the lack of awareness and understanding of the political mechanism behind transit issues and transit planning. The real accountability structure is invisible to the public in its complexity as well as the interrelations between decisions by different political subjects in the various regional geographic areas (or counties). External decisions, that is, decisions taken in other municipalities or counties or by other groups, influence internal decisions and outcomes and complicate the traceability of accountability levels, and affect internal priorities and plans. The public fails to understand this complexity. The public also fails to understand/know about the political levels and steps necessary to make a vote possible. The issue is strongly related to inefficient efforts by local administrations, political leaders and transit leaders to communicate to the public important information regarding the region's political structure and transit structure.

Extensive press review of articles published between 2007 and 2013 allowed us to detect the overall negative image of transit providers that print media portrayed in recent years.¹⁰⁴ Little emphasis is placed on publicizing outreach or public involvement efforts. The focus is mostly on the failures or pressing issues faced by transit agencies/providers or their user

groups, and on dilemmas of future scenarios. At the same time, the press review indicated that “transit development” or “transit” at large was portrayed as an important and necessary element for the region, revealing a disconnect between the positive image of “abstract concept of transit” and the negative image of concrete local transit entities/systems. Overall negative perceptions regarding transit are related to the lack of trust in the capability of the systems to meet demand and generate new demand, the inefficiency and unreliability of service, as well as the inadequacy of routes. Interestingly, a pilot public opinion survey conducted by the University of Detroit Mercy in 2013 (307 responses) revealed a similar disconnect.¹⁰⁵ While the majority of people did not think transit was important for them or their families, the majority of the people agreed that transit development is important for the region.

In the interview with Bill Shea, the lack of coordination among advocacy groups was brought up, together with the general low visibility of such groups and their leaders (with the exception of TRU) (Owens 2013). In the March 22, 2013 interview with Joel Batterman, MOSES Policy Coordinator and Trans4M Core Member, a different picture emerged.¹⁰⁶ Michigan Environmental Council, TRANS4M, and Michigan Suburban Alliance seem well connected and interacted with other citizens groups (MOSES, Sierra Club, TRU, Metro Coalition Congregations, and TRANS4M) during their most recent transit educational campaign. The issue seems more related to the visibility of these groups and the visibility of their actual coordination than to the actual level of coordination, which instead seems very appropriate.

One pressing issue in terms of public opinion on transit deals with the capability of new transit plans (not only in the way they are crafted but also in the way they are portrayed to the public) speaks to the needs and wishes of diverse stakeholder groups. Several pressing issues, such as Detroit’s population decline, Detroit’s bankruptcy, the state of transit in the region, and the presence of opt-out communities that do not participate in the transit network, interfere with how a plan is received by different groups, and reinforces the divide between Detroit’s inner suburban ring and the wider region, as well as broad political and social/racial divides across the region. Joel Batterman questioned the ability of current presentations of the plan to attract diverse stakeholders (as such presentation was shaped to ensure Republican support).¹⁰⁷

Overall, several articles reviewed portray a divisive regional condition. In an August 15, 2010, opinion piece from the *Detroit Free Press* by Marie Donigan, Michigan State Representative,¹⁰⁸ pointed out the potentially negative consequence of new uncoordinated projects in the region, such as the M-1 Rail project, a new light rail development along the Woodward corridor, that would span from the city of Detroit to cities in the inner ring and the new regional strategic planning by the Regional Transit Authority.

The divide between the reality of the struggling DDOT system, with continuous cuts and their effect on the Detroit public, and the newly launched regional plan and the funding involved, was portrayed by Jeff Gerritt, columnist, in the October 13, 2011, *Detroit Free Press*.¹⁰⁹ In this opinion piece, “Region must act now in bus crisis,” Gerritt included a quote from a Detroit resident, who reported dissatisfaction among riders who would prefer to see

improvements in local public transit in the city rather than have a new, efficient system to connect the suburbs with downtown.

Public opinion can be influenced by news coverage and might be as split as the conditions portrayed in the articles and editorials. Along the same line, Joel Batterman emphasized the issue of taking for granted Detroit's support in a future vote, and the dangers of disregarding the potential imbalance between new plans and a failing old system.¹¹⁰ A strong and unified public opinion will be critical for this region as it faces a future vote on the transit plan. As Batterman highlighted, the 2014 vote would be the first of its kind in this region, as it would not be conducted county by county but as a one-region vote.

Key Issues for the Detroit Region

As shown above, an in depth press review was conducted for the years 2007 through May 2013 for three major newspapers (*Crain's*, *Detroit Free Press*, and *Detroit News*); online documentation (press releases, newsletters, annual reports, general website information, and social media) on local transit providers/agencies and local transit advocacy was studied with regard to public opinion efforts and public involvement/outreach. Two local transit reporters and four coordinators/directors of local advocacy groups were interviewed with regard to current media issues and engagement efforts. The review allowed this team to synthesize the information found, regarding efforts by transit providers, and identify the following prominent themes:

- The variability of outreach efforts conducted by the transit providers (in particular in the case of SMART).
- The general low level of visibility of the outreach efforts.
- The inadequate use of online and social media tools.
- The availability of a great amount of data from surveys to capture satisfaction levels and specific needs of the ridership.
- The inward-focused quality of communications (e.g., through e-newsletters emailed to riders lists and not available online), which reduces the capability of the system to speak to larger populations/interests groups.

Overall, local advocacy groups seem strong, complementary to each other in their target groups and specific focus, and well inclined to collaboration. Their efforts have been limited due to resources and capability of each organization but seem to have been well organized and effective. Press review indicated a low level visibility of collaboration efforts among advocacy groups.

Several overarching themes emerged from the interviews with local reporters and advocacy groups. Summarizing the themes:

- The importance of media in shaping the discourse about regional transit.

- The interrelatedness of print media and social media/blogs.
- The politicization of the discourse about transit in the media.
- The disconnect between experts and the public.
- The positive image of transit as an abstract element, and the negative image of local transit in the media.
- The importance of visible and cohesive advocacy groups.
- The importance of flexibility in messaging and involvement strategies.

Implications and recommendations emerging from the study of these themes are discussed in more detail in the next chapter of this report.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC OPINION EFFORTS AND MEDIA INITIATIVES

Several recommendations emerged from this study of the comparable regions and the Detroit region. The following factors connected to media and public opinion are key for the success of transit initiatives and transit systems improvements: 1) Educating: tools for the public and media; 2) Branding: the building of a transit image; 3) Involving: public involvement approaches; 4) Messaging: the bridging of regional divides.

#1 EDUCATING: TOOLS FOR THE PUBLIC AND MEDIA

The research on the four peer regions highlighted that a clear image of the plan/initiatives, if captured and amplified by media coverage, together with the employment of educational tools to engage the public, can create a ripple effect within the community, increasing support for transit initiatives and sustaining effective regional transit development. This finding confirms the priority of engaging in education and communication for transit agencies and advocacy groups. In particular, findings suggested that the lack of engagement in online and social media tools determines a low level of visibility of outreach efforts.

Recommendation 1a. Utilize Online Tools and Social Media

It is crucial that all transit agencies and advocacy groups recognize the role and importance of online information (websites/blogs/social media) as this cycles back and feeds into more traditional and authoritative communication channels (i.e., print media).

Interviews with local media (*Detroit Free Press*, *Crain's Detroit Business*, and *Detroit News*) shed light on the interrelatedness of online news, blogs and print media. The frequent cross-pollination of paper and online information can increase polarization and inaccuracy. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that blogs and other online tools can impact print channels of information and broadly public opinion.

Current levels of engagement with online and social media by transit providers and advocacy groups in the Metro Detroit region are inadequate and should be improved as soon as possible.

Allocating funds to media for transit, as well as attracting federal and foundation funds to support these initiatives, is important. Other tools that can be employed in a limited funding scenario include: partnering with educational institutions and student groups, as well as youth, minority, vocational, environmental groups, and partnering with private businesses and major business players (following the Cleveland model), including health care technology institutions and city cores/centers. A closer collaboration with advocacy groups is advocated to improve communication with the public. Nevertheless, keeping or participating in blogs should not only be the tasks of active advocacy groups but also of transit agencies that proactively seek to increase communication networking and improve their image, as well as open up agencies to effectively gather input from their public.

Recommendation 1b. Open Communication with the Media World

In order to make an impact on media, all transit agencies/advocacy groups should understand the priority of ensuring that transit managers/designated personnel become readily available and “desirable” to local media when media representatives seek information on current transit issues.

From interviews with local media (*Detroit Free Press*, *Crain’s Detroit Business*, and *Detroit News*), study of print and online materials and visits to other regions, the following prominent findings emerged: journalists gravitate around those who make themselves more visible and propose themselves as a source of information. This element uncovers the embedded subjective and political nature of views on transit that are portrayed through media. As quoted earlier in the section on current Detroit, “Media is driven by the info derived from the private groups.”¹¹¹ Finally, effective communication with media requires time and should not be a “one time emergency communication.”

Continuous communication can ensure an increased comprehension of the struggles and contribution to the region of work by transit agencies.

Recommendation 1c. Educate the Media

Local transit agencies/providers and local transit-related advocacy groups must strive to educate media about their efforts.

Journalist, activist, and bloggers are the real interface between transit agencies and the public and must be educated in their turn by the transit agencies.

A good example of effective educational efforts by transit agencies of media can be found in the Denver region, where the FasTracks Public Information (PI) Team promotes a good working relationship with media organizations: it conducts annual visits with local media organizations and community newspapers to provide information on FasTracks and to give the media an opportunity to ask questions about the program; it gets feedback on the elements of FasTracks of most interest to the media representatives, their readers, viewers and listeners through the FasTracks Media Working Group, with representatives of local media entities; RTD is characterized by a good level of engagement in social media. For more details, see the RTD Strategic Information plan and the active education of media on RTD through specific programs in our original report.¹¹²

Regular annual or by-annual meetings/visits for updates on plans and priorities of the transit agency would ensure a better knowledge and understanding by media representatives on complex transit issues versus the sparse communications on urgent issues.

The St. Louis region represents a good example of an effective on-the-ground educational and public participation work that targets diverse groups: the transit agency understands the importance of clarity in communicating plans to community members and the importance of local media support. See more details in our original report.¹¹³

As communicators and intermediaries, journalists and media people can act as a bridge between transit agencies and the communities they serve, facilitating communications in both directions (agency to public, public to agency). It is the responsibility of the transit agency to approach and inform these “mediators” to help the communication with the public.

Recommendation 1d. Educate the Public about Regional Complexity

Local transit agencies/providers and local transit-related advocacy groups must strive to educate the public about the interrelated benefits of regional transit for different stakeholder groups and about the complexity of policy/political mechanisms that affect transit planning and implementation.

Findings revealed the political nature of the discourse on transit, as well as a disconnection between “transit people” and the general public, also derived from a lack of knowledge and understanding of issues connected to transit by the general public. The public often misunderstands the accountability structure of transit decisions and this favors distrust in transit agencies and groups, and opposition to transit initiatives. In particular, the Metro Detroit region (as well as several comparable regions) is characterized by a broad dividedness: urban versus suburban, diverse and disconnected ethnic groups (in particular White and African American), cities that are politically polarized, and opt-out communities. At the same time there is an interconnectedness not always understood (such as the need for an agreement among a certain set of cities and mayors to pass a proposal, or the need to think regionally about a network rather than thinking of local transit initiatives that cannot serve nearby communities). These issues demand a strong and coordinated educational effort by transit providers and advocates.

Better education would help overcome the disconnection between transit experts and the people/public. The lack of awareness and understanding of the political mechanism behind transit issues on the contrary favors misconceptions with regard to accountability and responsibilities for transit management and development and can lead to an increasing level of distrust between transit agencies and groups.

#2 BRANDING: THE BUILDING OF A TRANSIT IMAGE

Recommendation 2a. Use Imagery and Design

It is crucial to recognize the role and importance of imagery and design (captured and distributed by media) in shaping the collective image of transit in the region. Pilot corridors, the new branding of the agency, buses, and bus stops, and the dissemination of new images via internet and print media (of current transit or future plans) are powerful tools towards increased understanding of transit potential and increased support by the public.

Another significant factor that emerged from the study of the four peer regions is the importance of transit agencies in portraying a positive image of their agency and the system as well as a positive image of transit initiatives. The “Transit Image” can be thought of as a hybrid between a physical/environmental image of places and systems, and a digital/media image, as the ensemble of images and descriptions or reviews available

online and in print media. The physical/environmental image includes all the aspects of design, including branding of station and buses and streetscape design, such as benches planters, pavement design, and lighting.

The HealthLine Corridor development in Cleveland was very successful in terms of communicating the benefits of the new plan to the public through educational processes. GCRTA was also able to involve local business leaders and to develop a strong public-private partnership. This winning approach was astutely complemented by an effective rebranding of the transit image, including new streetscape design and environmental graphics. The Cleveland Euclid Corridor has become an urban showcase of the current and future transit opportunities. This has led to an increase in ridership, with the attraction of additional riders, but it can now also strengthen regionally the image of transit for the general public of non-riders and suburban residents. See more details in our original report.¹¹⁴ A new, strong physical (and digital) image of transit can increase ridership, and it can increase regional support for transit, as the belief in the positive role of transit towards improved quality of life and urban life can boost support for proposals, for taxes that fund transit, or for political decisions that support transit plans.

The “digital image” of transit (i.e., the online image of services, systems and agencies) reinforces and enhances the physical one, as certain images can become powerful tools that embody and portray to the public key benefits and potential benefits of transit. These images circulate through print media, TV and online communication, and impact the public perception of transit. The Cleveland Corridor represents a positive example of effectiveness in developing a key corridor, showcasing change and uplifting the agency image. More details are included in the original report.¹¹⁵

The digital/media image is a representation of the real image of transit that speaks to the public about the agency’s philosophy and priorities, the impact on the region of its initiatives, transit plans and public involvement practices through online engagement tools (including websites, blogs, social media, press releases, reports) and through grassroots local community engagement tools (one-on-one conversations with community leaders and phone calls, participation at community meetings and hearings, local events, surveys and conferences, and print media coverage).

Along with those tools listed at the opening of this recommendation, other typical tools include: e-newsletters to riders, mailing lists, e-blast notifications, and answer lines. In addition to these tools, it is critical that communication also include information and images available to non-riders (available both online and in print media) in particular, considering that in this region transit will require the support of primarily non-riders.

Recommendation 2b. Use Highly Visible Outreach Methods

Transit agencies must increase visibility of their efforts in order to strengthen public support and increase communications channels with media and the public.

The Atlanta case study clearly exemplifies how that lack of clarity in presenting the future vision and plan, captured and amplified by media, determined frustration and criticism

and ultimately favored a cascading effect of events that brought about the failed vote on a transit initiative. Visibility remains a key issue in the Metro Detroit region, characterized by a general low visibility of the public involvement efforts as well as lack of clarity and visibility of collaboration efforts among advocacy groups. This topic is also discussed in the following recommendation section.

#3 INVOLVING: PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT APPROACHES

From interviews with local media, advocacy groups and agency personnel, and through the study of print and online materials, it appears that the Detroit region has not been characterized by coordinated and continued public involvement efforts, but rather by limited and small involvement and outreach efforts typically not coordinated among transit providers/agencies. Furthermore, compared to other regions, such as Denver and St. Louis, it appears that the Detroit region “does not even have experience with taking [on] any major media outreach.”¹¹⁶ However, more recently, several ongoing initiatives and studies have been initiated in the region, such as the Woodward Avenue Rapid Transit Alternatives Analysis (AA) and the Detroit Future City project.¹¹⁷

Recommendation 3a. Strategize to Ensure Coordinated Public Involvement

The strategizing and establishment of a coordinated public involvement approach is a priority in the Detroit region. The involvement of the public should be an early step in the planning process, assuring the development of public ownership of the plan and substantial participation in each phase of the process.

As stated earlier in the comparable regions results section, a good example of public involvement strategy is represented by the FasTracks Public Information Team in Denver, which involved the public in each step of the plan, and communicated and engaged internal and external stakeholders through seven strategic Communication Programs:¹¹⁸

1. Internal Relations
2. Public Involvement
3. Public Outreach
4. Government Relations
5. Media Relations
6. Issues Management
7. Crisis Communications

The St. Louis and Cleveland regions are other good examples of effective communication and interaction with the public. In particular, the St. Louis transit agency has undertaken several media and public opinion outreach efforts, such as participation in community

meetings, transit workshops, major campaigns, and public involvement in the creation of the new plan.

Recommendation 3b. Use Diverse and Appropriate Public Involvement Tools

The public should be engaged at different scales: the community level through outreach or grassroots efforts, and the county, and regional levels, through mass communication tools (TV, radio, social media).

Tools that the Cleveland, Denver and St Louis transit agencies use to communicate, involve the public, and promote transit initiatives are the following: newspaper ads, bus and light rail ads, banners, social media, outdoor advertising (such as billboards) with quick and simple messages, videos, online surveys, forums, telephone town hall meetings, information materials (such as brochure and project fact sheets), and pictures showing the progress of the transit initiatives.¹¹⁹

It is crucial that the public becomes more aware of how decisions are made, and what role they can play and what input they can provide at certain steps of the process (from mobilization, to participation, to ridership). And similarly, it is crucial that transit agencies and advocacy groups become educated about the public's perceptions and needs.

Recommendation 3c. Foster Visibility and Coordination of Advocacy Groups

Local citizens and transit-related advocacy groups should better communicate to the public their coordination/collaboration, as well as increase in size, and reach through "coalitions."

Findings indicated that a good level of coordination exists among advocacy groups in the region. The concern is the low level of visibility of the efforts by non-transit affiliates, and the lack of visibility of the cohesive coordinated approach of advocacy groups. Broadening coalitions and broadcasting alliances' and cooperative efforts become critical to portraying a well-coordinated approach.

Through coordination and coalition, the spectrum of stakeholder groups that can be reached effectively can widen and be more representative of the whole region's social and political diversity. Coordination efforts and visibility efforts may include: increased online efforts and initiatives connected to social media, use of online blogs, increased local events and conferences/workshops, online educational campaigns, volunteer drives at educational/vocational events of key local community groups. Overall, a better connection and the establishment of partnerships with religious, educational and non-profit groups in the region is advocated, as well as paying attention to communicating with non-transit proselytes (therefore, newsletters or press releases sent to a targeted mail list is not considered as effective as, for example, posting visual and video material on a YouTube channel or a blog that can be viewed by all).

#4 MESSAGING: THE BRIDGING OF REGIONAL DIVIDES

The Weak Image of Transit in the Detroit Region

The fragmented structure of transit in Metro Detroit has fostered the weak image of transit, and the lack of a regional cohesive vision has diminished the importance of transit. What emerged from the analysis of media coverage for key events in history from 1994 to 2006¹²⁰ is, in fact, the political disagreement and sense of disillusion and distrust among the public towards the success of transit decisions and plans. The research conducted on key transit events, media initiatives and public involvement in Detroit from 2007 to 2013¹²¹ also showed that local media are often polarized and often portray a negative image of transit, and can influence public opinion. In this region it becomes critical to promote effectively a positive vision for future transit plans that can overcome the lack of regional cohesiveness and the disconnection between transit experts and the general public.

Educational campaigns and appropriate educational messages are crucial for the success of plans and transit initiatives. As indicated in the findings from the study of the comparable regions, effective campaign strategies should include: pre-campaign ground actions, in order to build public support and to avoid opposition; the education of media and general public on transit issues; and the collaboration with grassroots organizations, local leaders and active groups, including the involvement of marketing and political consultants, professionals and the business community that play a vital role in bringing funding. The campaigns should aim to address issues of diversity among stakeholder/population groups and to portray a positive shared vision of transit initiatives. It is also important to capture people's perceptions of transit before and during campaigns.

Recommendation 4a. Communicate to Bridge Regional Perspectives and Personal Priorities

Educational messages and campaigns should strive to bridge the disconnection between personal priorities and perceptions about importance of transit and "regional perspectives" and priorities. In particular, transit development/enhancement should not be portrayed as a remedy to negative issues/problems but as a positive element in itself.

In sum, the message must address:

"Why is this important to me?"

Findings uncovered the overall negative image of transit in the Detroit region, and a discrepancy between the general perception of "transit" as an idea or abstract concept and perceptions and opinions with regard to the concrete transit systems available in the region. The majority of the people feel transit is "for someone else" – not for them, and think transit might be beneficial to the region, but not necessarily to them, directly.

A good strategy should include unveiling benefits to non-riders, as well as demonstrating the versatility and potential for the system for likely riders.

Appropriate Messaging

A clear example of different approaches to messaging for transit can be seen in the contrast between the St. Louis message “Some of us ride it, all of us need it,” which focuses on inclusion, a coexistence of population groups with different needs; and the Atlanta 2012 campaign, which focused primarily on reducing traffic congestion and proposed transit as a remedial move in a negative scenario. More details may be found in the original report.¹²² Underlying potentially invisible benefits should be highlighted and brought to the attention of the public.

Advertisements become important to communicate to the public simple and positive messages that can translate numbers and priorities visually. Transit campaigns can be conducted not just through TV, radio, and online, but also through social media. Utilizing community champions in ads or messages can be useful to bring credibility and to communicate to the public who is supporting the plan. As stated earlier in the report, a great example of clear and positive campaign messaging can be seen in the Salt Lake campaign designed by R&R Partners (more details are retrievable through the Metro Detroit Transit Workshop website¹²³).

Recommendation 4b. Strategize for Effective Presentation of Plans and Gathering Public Opinion

Local transit agencies/providers and local transit-related advocacy groups should strategize effecting a new “presentation” of a “transit vision” for the region, distinct from previous anticipations by media or guessed predictions by media. The message should be based on a coherent shared vision, that encompasses both the regional-commuter system and the local bus system and on their complementarities to one another.

Findings uncovered issues related to the presentation of future visions and plans for transit in the region. The careful crafting of messaging can ensure that the plan speaks to diverse groups, in particular non-riders, considering that in this region “The people who pay the most for transit (taxpayers) are often the people who ride it least.”¹²⁴

Another key issue that emerged is the necessity to ensure the different ongoing transit initiatives and projects are coordinated and follow the same plans and goals. Competitiveness between projects can confuse and diminish the support by the public, as one project might be perceived as more beneficial to certain groups (e.g., city dwellers or commuters) or as more resource demanding than ongoing transit initiatives. In view of the future Detroit Metro four-county (Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, and Washtenaw) tax increase vote for transit funding, it will be key to carefully portray the relationship between the different transit initiatives in the region, in particular considering the natural divide between city-ring and suburban areas. As Joel Batterman emphasized, the issue of taking for granted Detroit’s support in a future vote is present if the public perceives an imbalance between the new plan and failing old system (DDOT).¹²⁵

As emphasized by Batterman, the upcoming vote will be the first of its kind as it will not be conducted county by county but as a whole region vote (first the time in the Detroit region).¹²⁶ This requires a careful understanding of regional complexity and regional divides.

In the short term, Detroit's complex situation (including DDOT's present and future prospects and Detroit's bankruptcy) cannot be "virtually ignored" in the plan presentation and should be dealt with in connection to the plan in order not to undermine public support.

Recommendation 4c. Analyze Campaign Outcomes

The analysis of factors that determine positive or negative campaign outcomes is critical. A key strategy should include a clear message segmentation in order to speak to diverse groups and explain why the plan would be valuable to them.

Matt Helms pointed out that there is no real tradition in this region of analyzing factors that determine positive or negative campaign outcomes.¹²⁷ Joel Batterman proposed that students, young people, elderly, mobility-impaired, and disability groups should be reached across whole region.¹²⁸ Additionally, as it can be anticipated that funding mechanisms and spending strategies will be a key factor, we suggest that putting transit spending into the larger transportation-spending context (which includes spending for road system expansion and maintenance) would enable the public to understand the bigger picture and the relative weight of certain funds compared to much larger ones.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study allowed us to identify key public opinion/involvement efforts and media initiatives in comparable regions, to analyze past and current public opinion and media efforts in the Metro Detroit region, and to define a set of recommendations for successful future media initiatives, and public opinion and involvement efforts for the Metro Detroit region. These findings apply to regions similar to Detroit, in terms of complexity and divisive issues.

The analysis of successes and failures from Detroit and four peer regions (Cleveland, Atlanta, Denver and St. Louis) allowed us to identify key trends and important issues connected to media and public opinion efforts, and the results of the analysis allowed us to define a set of 12 factors/recommendations in reference to the following key themes for building a positive public opinion regarding transit: 1) Educating: tools for the public and media; 2) Branding: the building of a transit image; 3) Involving: public involvement approaches; 4) Messaging: the bridging of regional divides.

The study uncovered the capability of media to capture public opinions and to present transit issues and initiatives in a positive, neutral or negative perspective, the importance of the availability of key transit leaders to become desirable news sources for media, the importance of communicating with the media community about transit on a regular bases, the interconnectedness of print media and social media (which cannot be considered in separate “either/or” categories), and the polarization of information, as well as the political nature of information about transit, the consequences of poor clarity in communicating about transit, and the role of media and public involvement strategies in building support for transit (as shown in the Denver and St. Louis case studies), the importance of ensuring increased visibility of transit-related initiatives and of collaborative efforts in a region, in particular, and of branding and promoting a positive transit image (as in the Cleveland case study), and finally the importance of recognizing the role of journalists, activists and bloggers as intermediaries between the public and transit agencies.

As the Metro Detroit region moves forward with plans and visions of regional transit, the strategizing and establishment of a coordinated public involvement approach constitutes a priority. A continued involvement that begins in the early stages of planning is necessary. This will ensure the increase of public ownership of the plan and the increased awareness by the public of decision making processes and political mechanism, which will promote trust in transit agencies and the governmental bodies involved. The employment of a variety of media communication tools, including social media, by transit agencies, governmental bodies and transit advocates is suggested for continuous communication with the public and media people. Open communication is helpful in the education of the public and media and the strengthening of support for transit.

The promotion of a positive image of transit (in its physical and digital forms), and a clear messaging capable of framing positively the contribution of transit to the region’s economy and quality of life is key. Messages that bridge personal priorities and regional perspectives (as well as those bridging the divide between city dwellers and suburban areas dwellers, riders and non-riders) should be at the core of future transit educational campaigns. Though message segmentation is appropriate, striving to create and sustain

a cohesive regional vision capable of encompassing both the commuter systems and the local bus systems and their complementarities to one another is also important.

Finally, the coordinated work of transit agencies and advocacy groups, and the increased visibility of their efforts in the region will be important to build momentum for transit in the region.

This study strived to analyze highly varied and complex relationships between media, public opinion and support for transit in five regions (Cleveland, St. Louis, Atlanta, Denver, and Detroit). Details and summaries of newspaper and online articles consulted can be found in appendixes to the various media chapters in the original reports by the UDM Transit Research Team.¹²⁹ Further research is advocated for the in depth understanding of resonances between media initiatives and specific transit-related events.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AA	Alternatives Analysis
AATA	Ann Arbor Transportation Authority
AJC	Atlanta Journal-Constitution
APTA	American Public Transportation Association
BRT	Bus Rapid Transit
BSDA	Bi-State Development Agency, St. Louis; Metro Transit
CBT	Citizens for Better Transportation
CDB	Crain's Detroit Business
CPP	Community Partnership Program
DDOT	Detroit Department of Transportation
DFP	Detroit Free Press
DN	Detroit News
DPM	Detroit People Mover
DSR	Department of Street Railways
DTC	Detroit Transportation Corporation
DTOGS	Detroit Transportation Options for Growth Study
FasTracks	FasTracks Program is a multi-billion dollar comprehensive transit expansion plan in the Denver, Co area
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
GCRTA	Greater Cleveland Transit Authority
GRTA	Georgia Regional Transportation Authority
HealthLine	Bus Rapid Transit System in Cleveland
HEP	The FHWA Office of Planning, Environment, and Realty
ISTEA	Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act
L.I.F.T.	L.I.F.T. Women's Resource Center
LPA	Locally Preferred Alternative
M-1 Rail	Streetcar line along Woodward Avenue in Detroit Michigan
MARTA	Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority
MDOT	Michigan Department of Transportation
MEC	Michigan Environmental Council
MetroLink	St. Louis region's light rail system
MOSES	Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength
MPO	Metropolitan Planning Organization
P3	Public Private Partnership
PED	Pedestrians Educating Drivers
PI	Public Information (Team)
RTA	Regional Transit Authority
RTD	Regional Transportation District

SEMCOG	Southeast Michigan Council of Governments
SEMTA	Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority
SMART	Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation
SPLOST	Special-Purpose Local-Option Sales Tax
STP	Strategic Transportation
T3	Tomorrow's Technology Today
TEA-21	Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century
The BUC	Buckhead Community Improvement District
TOD	Transit-Oriented Development
TRANS4M	Transportation for Michigan Coalition
TRB	Transportation Research Board
TRU	Transportation Riders United
UMTA	Urban Mass Transportation Administration
US DOT	U.S. Department of Transportation

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CLAUDIA BERNASCONI M.ARCH., M. DES.

Claudia Bernasconi is a registered architect in the European Union and an Assistant Professor of Architecture at University of Detroit Mercy. Her research focuses on preferences, attitudes and behaviors of riders/non-riders towards transportation systems. She has worked on several transit-related funded projects. Recent studies focused on public opinion regarding transit, public perception of transportation corridors and pedestrian transportation, on walkability, and on design and perception of automated transportation systems. Methods employed in her work combine approaches from the fields of environmental psychology and aesthetics, survey techniques, and urban landscape evaluation techniques. Her work has been published in journals, such as the Journal of Management and Sustainability, the Landscape and Urban Planning Journal, and conference proceedings of the Environmental Design Research Association, the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture, and Automated People Mover conference.

MARIAROSARIA DI PALO M.ARCH.

Mariarosaria Di Palo, Research Assistant, is a registered architect in the European Union, holds Bachelors and Masters degrees in Architecture from the University of Roma Tre in Rome, Italy and a Master in Community Development from University of Detroit Mercy (UDM). She practiced architecture for six years, including community and transportation development, and has worked for two years as Research Assistant at UDM. She has completed post-graduate courses in sustainable architecture, participated and won awards in sustainable architecture and planning competitions, and collaborated with Architecture without Borders.

KRYSIA BUSSIÈRE B.S. ARCH

Krysia Bussière is a graduate student pursuing the Master of Architecture at the University of Detroit Mercy. She has previously received a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Detroit Mercy and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Windsor. Krysia has been involved in two sponsored transit research projects in 2012 and 2013, focusing on public opinion regarding transit and the role of media, and has conducted in depth press review of major regional newspapers.

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