

System eager to grow along with ridership

By PAUL J. BALLARD



Paul J. Ballard

Published: Wednesday, 01/24/07

Five years ago this week, I arrived in Nashville to take the helm of a Metro Transit Authority that was so starved for financial resources, continuing even a basic level of services was questionable. My charge from the MTA Board was clear: Restore the fiscal health of the authority and make our services more focused and relevant to the citizens of Nashville.

With the steadfast support of Mayor Bill Purcell and the Metro Council, local financial support for MTA began to grow.

Twenty-five-year-old buses were replaced with new, state-of-the-art equipment. AccessRide services for people with disabilities were tripled. Professional managers came on board, and we expanded training for all personnel. Employees received decent raises and better benefits.

These five years of investments have paid off. MTA is now providing more services to more people than any time in its modern history. More than 8 million passenger trips were taken on MTA vehicles last year, a number unsurpassed since the acute fuel shortages of the mid-1970s.

Employer partnerships help

Because of new investments in fare-collection technologies, new partnerships have been formed between MTA and many of the leading institutions in Nashville. Employers are paying for employees to ride MTA and receiving one consolidated invoice each month.

Technology investments also are paying dividends through increased operating efficiencies in dispatching.

Modern transit buses are meeting Music City Star commuter trains in new stations designed to facilitate a seamless transfer of passengers and a simplified system of fare payment. This spring, we will break ground for Music City Central, a modern transfer station that will literally bring our customers in from the cold.

All of these improvements and their benefits to our citizens cost money. Together, we have built a very good small-transit system. However, we are reaching the limits of our capacity to serve many more citizens. During rush hours, passengers must often settle for standing room only.

To continue our progress and meet the increasing demands of a growing region, more financial support will be required so we can become a very good larger transit system. Passengers need us to add buses to new routes, increase the frequency of buses on existing routes, and schedule buses earlier and later in the day.

MTA has submitted its budget requests to Metro for the 2008 fiscal year that begins July 1. Through the Tennessee Public Transportation Association, we also are asking for additional support from the legislature.

Please let your local and state lawmakers know how important quality public transportation is to this community and all communities throughout Tennessee.

MTA is striving to help Nashvillians and our visitors have a safer, cleaner commute with less congestion. And if you've noticed improvements, tell them that MTA is making the most of every dollar we receive.

Published: Wednesday, 01/24/07