

My International Tour of Transit Systems

by Brenda Schweitzer

In the field of public transportation, as with most occupations, there are many resources available in seeking out valuable project information. These resources can be found within our own industry from the local level through the international opportunity. We take what applies to our interest, perhaps our challenge at the time, and use these resources to improve our focus project.

I've been well aware of the reports provided from the Transportation Cooperative Research Panel and have used them in my work with rural public transportation. I have always reviewed their mail solicitations for upcoming studies and have also nominated a few in my transportation circle for selection consideration. However, I can truthfully admit that I probably didn't understand the full magnitude of how this program works until I was nominated and selected to participate in the fall 2010 Transportation Mission Study, "Public Transportation Systems as the Foundation for Economic Growth."

This panel was exactly where my interests have fallen for the past several years! Our local project, Brookings Area Transit Authority (BATA), has been in the process of redefining public transportation for this charming university community for the past five years. Through this journey, I've gained immense passion about the role public transportation plays in a community, learning the obstacles and challenges of educating the community of how transit works and gaining respectable working relationships with local governmental entities in the process. At this time, I'm also serving on a technical panel set up by the South Dakota Department of Transportation for the purpose of defining the economic impact of public transportation in our state.

The Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) has sponsored the International Transit Studies Program (ITSP) since 1994. The stated purpose of the ITSP is to broaden the professional development of U.S. transit managers by providing them with opportunities to visit transit systems abroad, returning with insights and knowledge useful to their organizations, the transit industry, and our own transit careers.

Public transportation systems can be highly effective drivers of economic growth. Investments to improve and enhance transit systems are considered essential to the economy, culture, and quality of life in cities throughout the world. Our mission study took us to see how local investments are linked to economic growth in Istanbul, Turkey; Cairo, Egypt; and Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa.

Our team included Gwen Chisholm-Smith, Senior Program Officer with the TCRP, Transportation Research Board, Washington, DC; Kathryn Harrington-Hughes with Harrington-Hughes, Inc., Project Manager, International Transit Studies Program; Peter Varga, Team Leader; and 12 of us from around the United States, coming from various project demographics and positions. While the travel and transit education opportunities were incredible, having the chance to work with this team was the highpoint of this journey. As Karyn from Chicago said, "it's great to be with other transit junkies, we all understand each other!"

After our first team meeting in Washington, DC, we headed out to our first destination, Istanbul, Turkey. We arrived in the afternoon to beautiful weather and fascinating architecture. On our bus ride to the hotel, we were informed of a suicide bombing incident that happened approximately a block and a half from our hotel, right by the transportation rail hub. It was at that point that it struck me that I was far from home! There were guards in place, and I never felt unsafe. Now, riding back in a taxi from having dinner was a different story! Istanbul has a population of 12 million, utilizing several modes of transportation to move their people.



Mass Transit in Istanbul, Turkey

On Monday, November 1st, we began our day with Istanbul Ulasim, the transit operator of metro, light rail, tramway, funicular and cable cars in the city. They serve over 200,000,000 passengers per year. It was on this day that we had the incredible opportunity to tour the Marmaray Project. It is the deepest immersed tunnel in the world. They are expanding this tunnel to accommodate the people traveling from Asia to Europe. This system will have 40 stations and seven transfer stations, moving 75,000 passengers per hour. This tunnel expansion has been engineered to reflect the earthquake zone. We traveled down four flights of scaffolding to get to the bowels of this tunnel, and then walked on a mesh walkway the length of approximately eight football fields to tour the ongoing construction. We were beneath the sea!



Getting ready to descend into the Marmaray Tunnel!

The team was treated with such incredible respect and hospitality as we toured their rail and bus systems. We were treated to a dinner cruise on the Bosphorus Strait, the waterway between Europe and Asia. What we particularly noticed was how the locals worked with each other in developing their mode of transportation to get to the rail and bus systems. This was done using minibuses. They understand their needs and do what they must to get their own to work, education, social and other destinations. Coming from the rural sector in the United States, this was fascinating to see the basic coordination to deal with 12 million people.

Wednesday, November 3rd, we departed Istanbul for Cairo, Egypt. I have to admit Cairo was nothing I had imagined. Our first introduction to their transit systems was through the windows of our bus from the airport to our hotel. The three-lane road was operating more on the basis of a six-lane road, with everyone squeezing in to make room for all of the traffic. Of course, nothing moved fast, so we didn't witness major accidents; however, each car on the road looked as if it had been used in a Demolition Derby! While we did see the new, upgraded fleet of buses serving the authority, there was an amazing fleet on the road that was in horrible disrepair, filled so full of people that they were almost falling out of the vehicles. Our hotel looked over the Nile River in downtown Cairo. Depending on the source, Cairo has a population of between 16 and 20 million inhabitants. An exact count is impossible due to migrants, informal residents and other factors. This also complicates the provision of an efficient transit system. As with Turkey, people worked among themselves in getting each other to transit stations, etc. They have their own system and call them micro buses, which are entirely necessary in moving

approximately 6.5 million people per day; safety is a true issue, however. Those with no other options use public transit.

We traveled on Thursday evening to meet with the Cairo Transit Authority. In walking from their offices to the train terminal, it was interesting to see the extent of the pollution and filth, as well as the lack of lighting and little consideration for those with disabilities. In touring the train terminal, it was fascinating to see the 'Ladies Only' cars. We later learned this wasn't necessarily a cultural situation but to prevent harassment and disrespect from the male gender. Finding adequate accessible areas was a challenge. The two train lines offered a total of 55 stations in Cairo, moving approximately 3,000,000 passengers a day.

Cairo is working to move their people out of the city center, allowing for economically enhancing the outlying areas by providing transportation to those subdivisions. This will reduce the intense congestion of central Cairo, as well.

Onto Johannesburg! Johannesburg is one of the newest cities in the world, and the largest city in South Africa with a population of 3,888,182. There is high unemployment, and the transit systems have had tremendous changes and impact on their city.

We were greeted by a very organized and efficient team from the City of Joburg Department of Transport. The MMC (Member of Mayor's Committee for transport), Rehana Moosajee, was an exceptional woman with great passion for the people and transport of JoBurg. She and her team work with the challenges of a very poor, highly populated area, the volatility of the private taxi services.

With a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) plan in place, construction and implementation was jump started with the 2007 award of the 2010 World Cup Soccer Tournament. This BRT system is called Rea Vaya, or 'we are going'. As with the other two cities, we were intrigued on how the local people set up their own minibus systems. The unique situation Johannesburg implemented was pulling a small segment of these private minibus systems into their plan, with a great expansion to be followed as the Rea Vaya grows. The sense of inclusion and partnership has been a positive move for the minibus community. However, there remains great discord with the remaining operators, and apartheid



Brenda Schweitzer at Soccer City in Johannesburg, South Africa

is still being dealt with throughout South Africa.

We were able to experience sharing a park with MMC Moosejee at the site of one of the Bus Stations, which had a large picture of Nelson Mandela, honoring him, as through apartheid, blacks were not able to share parks. How humbling to experience sharing a park with a community of black people who had once never dared to do so. We also had the opportunity to ride the Rea Vaya BRT and stopped at Soccer City, home of the 2010 World Cup Tournament! The BRT was put into motion days before the tournament.

While in Johannesburg, we also toured the very new Gautrain, a high-speed train linking ORT, Joburg and Tswane. This privately funded system is an amazing state of the art system, but it moves few people at a high fare. The Gautrain system is new and still being expanded.

We had just 23 hours in Cape Town, but the team agreed that this would be where we would like to return to! We met with a very welcoming group from the City of Cape Town. Like Johannesburg, they have a new Integrated Rapid Transit (IRT) system, an initiative to transform the public transport sector. The modes to be integrated are: metrorail, road-based services on trunk routes, conventional bus services, minibus taxi integration, feeder bus services, etc. This plan has been the work of international research, with social, economic, and environmental factors brought into it. Their vision is to provide a world class sustainable transportation system and to improve the quality of life and economic condition of the city.

Cape Town has not been as efficient in working with the minibus operators as Johannesburg. Just as we were leaving city hall there was a very large demonstration happening on the steps of city hall. As mentioned, these have been very volatile situations, as implanting an efficient transit system threatens the livelihood of those private operators that have been providing service on a minimal level for years. Armed guards and armored trucks were there as well.

Following our meeting with Cape Town officials, we began our long journey home. This was perhaps the most difficult part of the trip! We lost eight hours in time changes and had approximately 42 hours of travel and layover time. This leg of the trip was humbling in understanding that we would probably not see most of our team again.

Our team will consolidate our assigned topic notes, and submit our information to the Transportation Cooperative Research Panel for the writing of our mission report, "Public Transportation Systems as the Foundation for Economic Growth".

I was told that this experience would have an immense impact on me on both a personal level as well as a professional level. No truer words could have been said. Throughout the world, transportation is a major part of society, bringing social, economic and environmental values to light. I look forward to bringing this gained knowledge to my system and the rural areas we serve. We can appreciate the sparse populations we work with, as well as the cohesive working relationships we have with the federal, state and local funding sources.

The Transportation Cooperative Research Program is a wonderful opportunity to learn how we can learn as well as improve our own systems, using the knowledge and passion of transit professionals from the United States. A special thank you to all who made this journey possible for me.

Brenda Schweitzer is the Executive Director of Brookings Area Transit Authority (BATA) in Brookings, SD. She has been a leader in the provision of rural transit in South Dakota and in the past has served as the President of the Dakota Transit Association (DTA).