

Fairmont-Marion County Transit Authority: You Can Count on Them

By Rich Sampson

We found our trip taking us up into north-central West Virginia and into Fairmont to visit with George Levitsky and the Fairmont-Marion Transit Authority on the afternoon of Wednesday, April 27. We took the backroads into Fairmont from Philippi rather than the more direct route along I-79, which again afforded us the opportunity to enjoy the splendid views of this gorgeous state. Fairmont immediately struck us a small city valiantly attempting to reinvent itself after several decades of decline. The Fairmont Marion Transit Authority will clearly have an important role in the city's and the county's transformation.

At the curving intersection of Quincy and Adams Streets in downtown Fairmont, West Virginia once stood the home of Francis Harrison Pierpont. As the Governor of the Union-controlled portions of Virginia that eventually separated to form the Mountaineer State, Pierpont is often referred to as the father of West Virginia. Today on those same grounds – atop the hilly bluffs overlooking the headwaters of the Monongahela River that flows north to Morgantown and then Pittsburgh – are the facilities home to the Fairmont-Marion County Transit Authority (FMCTA).



The FMCTA's headquarters at Quincy and Adams Streets in Fairmont are home to West Virginia history, literally.

In the same manner that Pierpont is often credited with shaping the development of his native state, FMCTA has helped guide the contemporary identity of Fairmont and the surrounding region. Bridging the gap between both urban and rural transit through a range of services and connections, the system now

boasts of climbing ridership, growing links to health care facilities and an expanded role in enhancing the region's vitality.

Restoring Access

The arch of Fairmont's growth from a riverside outpost between Morgantown



FMCTA General Manager George Levitsky and Board of Directors President Raymond Morgan.

and Clarksburg to a small urban area corresponds with the trajectory of similarly sized communities elsewhere. From its establishment in the 1820s with just a couple hundred residents, its population skyrocketed in the century's last decade, with a nearly unbelievable 450 percent explosion to more than 5,500 between 1890 and 1900. Drawn by a mix of mining interests, industry and manufacturing – made possible by access to the Monongahela – population topped out at nearly 30,000 in 1950 and today stands at 19,000 largely due to the retreat of the nation's

manufacturing and industrial sectors over the past half-century.

On a parallel track was the development of transit options in Fairmont. Streetcars installed by private companies first blanketed the city, and were converted to bus operation by the 1950s. Over the next two decades, these private bus routes became unprofitable and were abandoned in late 1971. Over the next 17 months, the city of Fairmont and Marion County worked together to restore transit service, and FMCTA buses were rolling on June 7, 1973. Both governments supplied the initial investment necessary to launch the system, hence the combined name.

FMCTA began operations with seven routes serving Fairmont, with another five extending beyond the city's boundaries into Marion County, much of it rural territory. The same cohort of workers, shoppers and students at Fairmont State University and Pierpont Community & Technical College – where today's enrollment stands at more than 7,300 – that utilized the private streetcars and buses returned to take advantage of the restored service. Restoring transit service in the region marked a crucial decision for local officials and community leaders.

“It was important for us to bring back our bus service,” says Raymond Morgan, the longtime President of the agency's Board of Directors. “People around here really needed a way to get to work, to the doctor or school, and that's why we were able to come together to set-up the system.”

A Little City, A Little Country

Although Fairmont has a well-defined downtown district and falls squarely into the category of a small-urban area, Marion County is a largely rural region. Accordingly, FMCTA has always existed as a hybrid between rural and urban transit. Several routes are focused on service within Fairmont, offering frequent service and many stops. But those stretching out through the county – to communities like Farmington, Mannington, Metz and Worthington – are longer runs making a handful of stops every hour or two. Today, the system operates 16 routes on weekdays, with another five continuing on Saturdays, all of which congregate at the Court House in Fairmont to facilitate transfers. FMCTA also offers demand response service for those who cannot access the fixed-route network.

The availability of access in smaller communities and rural areas of the county is a fundamental aspect for the region's vitality. For residents living in these outlying areas, a way to reach employment locations, medical care, educational programs and social services can be a profound element in maintaining their quality of life. Many such opportunities in Marion County are centralized in Fairmont, making a reliable and efficient means of mobility all the more essential. And, increasingly, as health care options and intercity travel become even more regionalized, new connections beyond Fairmont have only grown in importance.

To that end, the system expanded beyond

the boundaries of Marion County in the late 1980s to serve downtown Morgantown, along with Ruby Memorial and West Virginia University hospitals. The route operates four times each weekday on an hour and 25 minute trip, there and back, offering transfer's to the Mountain Line Transit Authority – Morgantown's transit system (*see page 36 for more – ed*). Additionally, in the mid-1990s, the system launched a new service to connect with Clarksburg in neighboring Harrison County. FMCTA's three daily roundtrips to Clarksburg not only link with the Central West Virginia Transit Authority (Centra) in the city's downtown, but also directly serve the VA Medical Center there. More recently, the agency has worked with Mountain Line to integrate its routes with Mountain Line's Grey Line regional bus service, connecting Fairmont, Clarksburg and Morgantown with downtown Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh International Airport.

“We operate a pretty unique and expansive system,” says George Levitsky, CCTM, the agency's General Manager since 2003, who was recognized as the Community Transportation Manager of the Year at EXPO 2009 in Providence, R.I. “We're a mix of a traditional city bus system and a long-distance rural program. But it's what people around here need to live their lives.”

Whatever It Takes

As much as it might be apparent how the FMCTA's blend of small urban and rural service works together to serve the region, less

obvious – but just as crucial – is the system's exhaustive work to become an active and relied-upon presence in the larger community. It begins with the operation's affordability – fares range from just \$.50 in the Fairmont city limits to only \$2 for the long-distance runs to Clarksburg and Morgantown – and haven't been raised in more than a decade. And although routes have been realigned over the years, large-scale cutbacks in service have also been avoided. For an area with gradually lower population counts and modest incomes, the system's resilience in the face of budget challenges and rising fuel costs is much needed.

“We've worked hard to keep fares and service where they've always been,” says Levitsky. “We need to be one aspect of our community people can count on from year to year.”

That spirit of dependability isn't limited to just fares and schedules. It's an overall mindset that spans everything from the FMCTA's trolley bus at the front of local parades to responding to riders whose trips require an extra measure of devotion. FMCTA drivers have shoveled out snowbound passengers and returned for a pick-up after a busy day at the doctor's office led to a missed trip. Levitsky has even been known to arrange housing for his drivers looking for new accommodations. Another story has Levitsky and his colleagues racing down the street to respond to a fire threatening neighboring structures. They were the first ones on the scene.

That ethos that defines the agency also



FMCTA has received strong endorsements from local voters in a series of levies to support its operations.



hasn't gone unnoticed by key leaders in the community.

“The FMCTA provides superior service for our residents,” says Andy Kniceley, Publisher of the Times West Virginian, Fairmont's local newspaper, who once observed FMCTA Maintenance Director Eric Southern rescuing one of his paper supply trucks stuck on a snowbank. “They're a good community partner and good stewards of community investment.”

“We’re so thankful to have an asset like the FMCTA,” agrees Tiffany Samuels, Executive Director of the United Way of Marion County. “They’re always here to help the people who need it most, and do it so professionally.”

As evidence of how embedded the system’s role in the community has become, when the West Virginia Department of Transportation recently constructed a new boulevard connecting downtown Fairmont to Interstate 79 – the Fairmont Connector – the agency automatically installed high-quality bus stops and bus bays on every block, anticipating FMCTA’s service along the stretch. Few transit systems find highway engineers naturally considering local transit needs without asking. Levitsky credits that presence to strong guidance and support from the West Virginia Department of Transportation’s Public Transit

The new Fairmont Connector roadway was built with new bus stops, without the agency needing to request them.



Division, as well as dedicated leaders and officials in Fairmont and Marion County who’ve backed the system for more than three decades.

Not That Uncommon

Based on its hybrid urban-rural identity, the FMCTA might seem distinct among transit providers. But with a closer look, the same values and habits that have made the system

successful here are the same that produce results elsewhere: efficient and responsive service; strong partnerships and regional connections; and a fundamental desire to reflect the best a community has to offer.

“We strive to be a community-minded transit authority,” says Levitsky. “I know that’s something that’s common among all our transit systems in West Virginia, and we’re honored to be a part of that.” **CT**



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