





## with Mayor Knox White

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We sat down again this month with Greenville Mayor Knox White to discuss the future of the public transportation system in Greenville and what the City is doing to improve it.

**GM: Greenville has done a lot of things right: Falls Park, the downtown baseball stadium and the Clemson ICAR campus all were forward-thinking projects. What has Greenville done wrong or not so well?**

**White:** Our most glaring omission is public transportation. We do so many things well, but this is not one of them. We don't need a huge system, but we do need an adequate system so that people can get to jobs and appointments and so that there is an alternative to the car. We have to do it with an eye to the future when our transportation needs will grow.

**GM: But most people have a car, so why should they care?**

**White:** Fair question. First, a lot of people don't have a car and live their lives severely limited in terms of getting to jobs, or to the doctor or to do any daily task. This includes a lot of seniors who can't drive. It is a sizable population that we seem blind to. Second, the high cost of energy means that we need to have an alternative system in place. More people on buses mean fewer cars congesting the roadways, which benefits all of us.

**GM: Now the city runs the system?**

**White:** The city now operates the bus system, but the governing board (Greenville Transit Authority) is still made up of representatives of the county,

city and legislative delegation. That is part of the problem. There is no clear "ownership" for the system. But we did step forward last year and offer to operate the system on behalf of the Transit Authority. Frankly, we were tired of seeing the bus system lurch from financial crisis to financial crisis. We felt that we could cut overhead costs in the system and access federal dollars that were left on the table. All of this would mean more money for actual bus operations. And that is exactly what we have done. We have saved the transit system over \$100,000 in administrative costs and captured nearly \$1 million from federal sources. Without this level of support, it is hard to see how the bus system would have avoided a shut down last year, especially when fuel prices spiked.

**GM: What kind of bus system should we have?**

**White:** For now, within our current budget constraints, our goal is to keep making incremental improvements. This includes small extensions of existing routes and "on time" bus service on these routes. But to really make transit viable, it has to make sense for more people by providing neighborhood shuttles and getting 15-minute or 30-minute service on most routes. That is when seniors, young people without driver's licenses, and everyone else might actually find transit a useful alternative to the car on some occasions. When we have a system that actually works this way, we can turn transit into an economic development tool by making it desirable to live and work along these routes. In the city this makes a lot of sense because apartment complexes, for example, are enhanced by access to transit.

**GM: Will we see this in the next 10 years?**

**White:** Only if we have some modest successes so that people can glimpse what works. The downtown shuttle is wildly popular. It shuttles in and out of the Earle Street neighborhood and through downtown. If we could find a way to expand it we might have the key to finding a system that actually works for Greenville, that is, a neighborhood shuttle system that works with the older fixed routes and invites more people to use transit.

**GM: What's the next step?**

**White:** To keep the buses operating efficiently and safely, something many of them were not doing previously. Most of the buses didn't even have working air conditioning or, worse still, reliable brakes. I'm not kidding when I say that some of the buses leaked so badly when it was raining that drivers handed out umbrellas!

We need to evaluate the route system to make sure the destinations still make sense. Eventually we would like to move to a system of smaller shuttle buses for the neighborhoods as a way to broaden the ridership. And, we need to work more closely with some of the bigger entities that even now rely on the system for customers and employees. This would include the hospitals and the malls. These are among the most popular destinations for the current bus ridership. The point is, though, the system needs to be useful to more people. ■

*Look for the Mayor's next Q&A in our July issue.*