



Kansas City Area Transportation Authority: public-private collaborations to expand mobility services

Agency:	Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA)
Location:	Kansas City (Missouri and Kansas States)
Service Area:	Kansas City Metropolitan Area
Modes:	RideKC bus service, the MAX Bus Rapid Transit service, Flex demand-response routes, RideKC Freedom paratransit service for the elderly and persons with disabilities, and RideKC Van vanpool service
Community Context:	Board of Commissioners, five from Missouri and five from Kansas.
Key Contacts:	Name: Jameson Auten Position: Vice President, Regional Service Delivery and Innovation Division KCATA Email: JAuten@kcata.org Phone: 816 346 0895

OVERVIEW

The Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA) is a bi-state agency created by a compact between the states of Missouri and Kansas. The KCATA is responsible for planning, construction, owning and operating passenger transportation systems and facilities within the seven-county Kansas City metropolitan area (Cass, Clay, Jackson, and Platte in Missouri; and Johnson, Leavenworth, and Wyandotte in Kansas). The agency operates RideKC bus service, the MAX Bus Rapid Transit service, Flex demand-response routes, RideKC Freedom paratransit service for the elderly and persons with disabilities, and RideKC Van vanpool service.

The KCATA started to adopt the mobility management concept in the early 2010s, with the first efforts focused on identifying all the mobility services (private and public) that were available in the region to facilitate for the community.

In 2015, with the arrival of a new General Manager, the KCATA reimagined its whole approach to providing service, coordinating regional efforts to build a comprehensive, seamless transit system connecting the entire Kansas City area. Now, the agency is leading several initiatives to complement transit services and offer more mobility options, such as a vanpool program for commuters and the RideKC Freedom program, an Uber-style app that provides on-demand services for paratransit and non-paratransit customers.

Guiding the work of the KCATA is the Smart Moves 3.0, the metropolitan Kansas City's long-range vision and implementation plan to enhance and expand transit and mobility services across the region. The plan was developed with the Mid-America Regional Council –the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the bi-state Kansas City region– and builds on prior planning efforts that started in the early 2000s. The mobility landscape envisioned by Smart Moves 3.0 includes efficient transit services and well-located mobility hubs where riders can transfer among fixed routes or connect with other mobility services.

LEADING CHANGE

The mobility efforts in Kansas City have been driven by two types of leaders: those who “prepared the runway for takeoff,” and those who “are running down the runway” that has been cleared.

The clearing of the runway has happened at a very high level. The mayor is a strong advocate of all modes of public transportation and has supported KCATA's innovations in the mobility landscape. He has not been afraid to take risks and get the job done. The Kansas City Chamber, empowered by the mayor and with a former KCATA's CEO as president, has also engaged in these efforts by establishing transportation as one of the chamber's top five initiatives for 2018. A third leg of the stool is KCATA's CEO and board, who have created a cultural path and encouraged the organization to try new things, supporting failures and successes.

Then, there are several organizations running down the runway. The KCATA Innovation team has played a key role in leading and coordinating the initiatives, persisting when it is necessary to advance their projects. Additionally, within the KCATA, the Marketing and IT teams have really engaged with the technology sector and the Innovation team in trying to figure out how to make mobility easier for people; and the Planning team has started looking at things beyond fixed route.

Externally, staffing firms have participated in jobs access initiatives. Kansas City has a big logistic industry sector, which is very seasonal. Therefore, staffing companies that supply those workers from the city center to where warehouses are located, 25 and 30 miles outside the urban core, have been leading the discussion of how to get workers there. They recognized that 40-foot buses were not always adequate and worked alongside KCATA to develop the vanpool program.

For the KCATA, the willingness of leaders to try new things, to fail, and to fight for what they think is a good idea have been crucial to innovate and sustain change. When an idea is not well received, or a pilot failed, leaders have been persistent in coming back at it, accepting they would have to deal with uncertainty and occasionally adverse results. The new mobility landscape requires breaking some paradigms, and the KCATA has had to challenge the notion that the only purpose of transit agencies is to provide mass transit, working on initiatives that not always increase ridership but connect people or improve access in the first/last mile.

Another key characteristic of change leaders is the ability to identify partnerships and allies. As the mobility management approach expands the traditional focus on transit towards other mobility

services, transit agencies require to work together with communities, the private sector and other public agencies to shape the new mobility landscape in the city.

INTEGRATING MOBILITY SERVICES INTO THE COMMUNITY

Getting Started

The concept of mobility management begun to resonate in the KCATA in 2011, with the idea of identifying what mobility services existed in the region that were not necessarily delivered by public transportation providers to better respond the different customers' needs. In 2013, the KCATA brought a full-time mobility manager to develop that function, focusing on senior and disabled communities. Through time, the agency has embraced mobility management and expanded its scope.

The base step to advance mobility was the adoption of a single RideKC brand to unite all the transit systems of the Kansas City region. Buses were rebranded as RideKC, and a regional map was created to show where and how are they connected. A single website was developed for information about schedules, routes and fares; and new, easy-to navigate transit schedules and new RideKC bus stop signs were launched. Moreover, all agencies adopted the same fare structure, allowing people to buy one pass and use it on different buses.

The idea came up after listening to customers who could not get from A to B (at least they use a car) because those points were in different systems. The KCATA formed what is called the Regional Transit Coordinating Council, headquartered at the MPO and made up of decision makers across communities, such as elected officials and county and city managers. The Council was a catalyst for change, bringing in the public and conducting an study to build a baseline of services available and areas well and underserved.

To further facilitate access to systems across the region, a regional eligibility process was created to apply for ADA paratransit and taxi voucher programs, replacing the three different processes that existed before; and the four different call centers were turned into one access point so that people can book paratransit trips or get fixed route information for any service in the same place.

Leveraging emerging mobility services, in 2016 the agency built a partnership between Bridj and Ford and began a pilot program to test an on-demand service. Using a mobile app, riders could request on-demand shuttle services that they accessed via dynamic rally points. The project had low ridership and was not continued, but provided valuable insights for the following initiatives.

Considering those learnings, the agency is now working on another app, RideKC Freedom, that works in the same way that Uber or Lyft, with 5% of the fare coming back to the transit authority; and looking for further collaborations to offer more mobility options.

Building Connections

With key partners such as the MPO, the chamber, and other transit providers like Transdev (the taxi company that also provides paratransit services), the agency is identifying what are their interests and how they fit into the broader vision to work together towards a shared outcome.

The MPO is a partner in the planning process, with a vision that is aligned with the KCATA's through the Smart Move 3.0 plan to advance mobility in the region. For the chamber, collaboration is about expanding jobs access. There are some studies that indicate the city has some shortcomings in that dimension, so the chamber is really engaged in these efforts. For the transit providers, the collaboration is about how to make access simpler so that people use their services. For Transdev, for instance, providing paratransit and taxi services has helped them to increase ridership and compete with TNCs.

An example of collaboration among different actors is the vanpool program. Interested in finding better options for workers to move to their jobs, staffing firms approached the KCATA with Enterprise, a company that provides vanpool management services. Together, they worked with the business community and launched a vanpool service pilot that allows groups of coworkers who live near one another to save time and money by commuting to work together. Enterprise provides a newer model van or SUV to the groups, who split the monthly rental cost among the participants. That cost is typically funded by payroll deductions, public subsidies, or are corporate sponsored by employers.

Moving forward

Historically, the agency had an in-house approach to innovation, reviewing services internally and focusing market research on current bus riders. Now, that process is open to actors whose input has not been typically incorporated into the planning process. A cross-functional innovative work group, made up of operations, planning, marketing, IT representatives and users, was established to analyze the gaps in services and look for ideas and opportunities to supplement or augment the transit system that is in place. To listen the new ideas that are coming into the marketplace, the KCATA is approaching small business and entrepreneurs and, more proactively, created an unsolicited proposal policy to allow new ideas and innovations from outside of transit to come in and take the form of a project. An example of this is the micro-transit project with Translook, which originated from an unsolicited proposal when the agency was not even looking for this type of project. Among the ideas that come in and those originated internally, the group prioritizes based on the expected benefits for customers and the operational costs. The Executive Committee then vets the proposals on their surface and, for the ones that are accepted, an extended team takes a deeper dive.

As the KCATA's role advances from a transit provider to a mobility manager, a more customer-centric approach and more coordinated efforts have been required. The agency is putting together consumer panels to build qualitative and psychographic profiles for riders and potential riders, in order to better understand who their customers are, what they need and how to approach them. This would enable the agency to complement their market research to design both services that

have greater value for customers and more targeted marketing campaigns. The KCATA has also restructured its organization three times in the last two years, with innovation getting higher up in the organization, able to go across and affect different processes, from planning to marketing.

To multiply the value of the services for their customers, the KCATA is looking for collaborations to support areas such as health, education or homelessness. The paratransit program RideKC Connections, registered as a 501(c)(3), acts as the non-profit wing of the agency allowing social net organizations to roll it into their grants, in which transportation is usually a big component. In this way, the KCATA can move people back and forth to jobs, homeless shelters, or hospitals at no cost to them.

The agency already developed a partnership with veteran groups to provide free bus rides for all Kansas City's veterans, and is now working on alliances with the health sector that would bring the overall cost of care for an individual down. The KCATA can provide transportation services that have lower cost than most current solutions for healthcare rides, saving money to insurance companies, hospitals, which would not need to have transportation departments, and users who could still ride without paying. The KCATA is talking with Uber Health, the initiative of Uber to cover this segment, and working with two other entities, a Foundation and a Healthcare network, to develop this idea and provide fixed route, cab service, paratransit or other mobility services to make sure people can get back to their follow-up visits.

Evaluating success

To find more appropriate ways to evaluate success of its mobility management initiatives, the KCATA asked the RideKC Advisory Committee, made up of academics, business community, riders and students, to define what is success for the multiple stakeholders that are using all the services.

As a first approach, the agency is evaluating its programs based on the number of riders that are using the service, who are they (for example, identifying if they are people who previously did not have access to that service), and the cost per trip. The KCATA is also surveying riders and non-riders to get their perception about the traditional and new services. Surveys enable the agency to identify valuable insights such as what attributes are adding value to customers or why people are not using the services that are available.

To evaluate their main projects, such as the Bridj project in 2016 and the RideKC Freedom On-Demand program, the KCATA has brought an external party to have an impartial and objective view of their results. The agency is also using these initiatives to identify the price elasticity of on-demand services. With the RideKC Freedom program for example, they increased the price after a few months, and found that ridership, although dropped at the beginning, got back to the levels before changing the price. As the KCATA offers more options to move around, they are identifying the most adequate price according who is using the services and when they are using it.

COMMUNICATION, OUTREACH AND MARKETING

One of the lessons learned with the Bridj project was the relevance of keeping marketing efforts focused on the potential users. Although the project caught great national media attention when it was launched, including articles from the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, many people who were in the service area did not know the program was for them.

For the RideKC Freedom On-Demand program, the agency designed a thoughtful marketing strategy so that people know the program exists and how to use it. As the initial focus was paratransit customers, the KCATA knew exactly who their audience was from their databases. They did a mailing and a special page in their website, changed messaging on the call center line, and leveraged “word of mouth” to spread information throughout the community. The testing period of the project was useful for that, as the people who were participating in the test talked about the program.

In their current initiatives, the agency plans to design more tailored communications to reach the wide range of stakeholders, considering elected officials, businesses and communities. As their needs are different, it is important to highlight how the initiatives add value for each of them so they embrace change. The KCATA is publishing monthly communications from the CEO to elected officials and the business community about what is going on at the agency, and addressing issues such as why are the changes important to the officials’ constituents or how they facilitate people access to jobs. For users, the agency plans to include some zip code specific marketing, whether it is through social media or mailing, to explain how the project would look like in each area, why, and how to access it.

Communication is also central to building and keeping relationships with higher-level public representatives. Besides the CEO and the executives who handle politics in Kansas City and visit the Hill twice a year, the agency works with four lobbyists in Washington, DC; Jefferson City, Mo., and Topeka, Ks. to keep officials aware of the things that the agency is working on. Maintaining those relationships close and the communication open is key to advance mobility in the region, as the elected officials must be able to stand behind what they voted on and their statements. The KCATA also communicates regularly with the FTA, making sure they know what the agency is doing and addressing their concerns. That requires sharing the good and the bad, so that both elected officials and the FTA know what are the challenges that the agency is facing and working on. KCATA’s executives have not been afraid to admit when things did not work as they expected, focusing on learnings and next steps, and communicating that to the stakeholders.

The KCATA also engages with local public officials to address the political challenges that brings having a state line that runs down the middle of the city. The needs are different at each side, and so is the politics. While the state of Missouri hosts the most part of the urban area of Kansas City, making the community more open to look at different solutions, the state of Kansas hosts more suburban areas, where people are more likely to prefer on-demand and customized services. Coordination also becomes more difficult at a regional level because the Kansas City region and

KCATA do not have a regional funding mechanisms, which usually limit the agency's capacity to match services where jobs are or with land use planning.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

To move from ideas to implementation, the KCATA has relied on communication, collaboration and pilots to ensure feedback is incorporated and generate buy-in for the projects.

To illustrate, the idea of the RideKC Freedom On-Demand pilot came up when the top executives of the KCATA asked whether they could provide better paratransit services, as users could not get same-day service and those services were usually late. A working team was set up to think through it, including the paratransit contractor that had demonstrated interest on making improvements. The group built on the idea of an on-demand service, and the RideKC Freedom program originated. It would enhance the service to customers and decrease costs as a non-dedicated fleet could be used.

The agency submitted the idea as a Sandbox grant application. And although they didn't get it, they thought the program could have a great impact on service and potential cost savings, so they went ahead by themselves. The KCATA's team, in collaboration with the paratransit contractor and the software company that handles the dispatching and scheduling service, set up the project and developed a first version of the app.

The project was vetted by the advisory committee, who backed the idea. While the team worked on the design of the program, the marketing department prepared the communication campaign and the CEO started to speak of it with elected officials. The team also set up a testing period, in which they made the service available to 20 users.

The testing period was crucial for a successful launching. Bringing the stakeholders in as early as possible allowed the team to incorporate user's input and have ambassadors for the initiative. By the time the project was launched, in May of 2017, it was owned by the ambassadors as much as for the agency, and was already known by the paratransit community. The service reached the expected target in the first month. By December of that year, that number had gone up from 2,000 to 8,000 trips per month. The program also expanded its coverage to all customers, among which paratransit users get subsidized trips through a code that they put in the app, which is connected to the eligibility database.

With the app, the KCATA also adopted a new software to manage ride information, including data about pickups, drop-offs, wait times, and distances. The same software is now being used by every service, which means all the data is gathered into one database, and routing performance information looks similar among services. This information is given to the MPO to incorporate it into the planning models, and used by the KCATA to identify what other services can be provided and at what costs.

Down in the pipeline, the agency is working with bike-sharing companies, TNCs and other private providers that the KCATA is not yet working with to expand the footprint of what the agency

serves. This is a fundamental and cultural change. The agency used to directly operate everything except for paratransit. Now, the KCATA understands that they are not competing with other providers but looking for partnerships to provide mobility options, and for collaboration with other actors in the health, education, or employment sectors to multiply the value of those services.

USEFUL LINKS

- KCATA website: <http://www.kcata.org/>
- KCATA Transit Initiatives: <http://www.kcata.org/transit-initiatives/>
- KCATA Annual summary:
<http://www.kcata.org/documents/uploads/DrivingResults2017.pdf>
- RideKC website: <http://ridekc.org/>