



TRANSIT AS A SOLUTION FOR DOWNTOWN PARKING, OFFICE LEASING AND EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

SUMMARY

Capital Crossroads Improvement District

INNOVATION

Downtown C-pass is the first program in which property owners, recognizing transit's role in creating and sustaining a vibrant downtown environment, agreed to fund unlimited transit access for employees through special assessments.

At the outset, property owners sought ways to address parking scarcity. Obvious approaches, such as building new parking structures, were expensive and unrealistic given the parking demand. CCSID took the innovative step of reframing the problem: setting aside the assumption there was "not enough parking," property owners asked whether the real issue might be "too many cars."

Viewing the matter from this angle cast light on a host of related problems—traffic congestion, stressful commutes, tailpipe emissions, ingrained attitudes toward public transit—that were stifling growth and vitality in downtown Columbus. This insightful reframing opened a door to an alternative solution that promised many farther-reaching impacts than would be achieved by constructing parking garages.

Free public transit would shift commuters from personal vehicles to buses, freeing downtown parking spaces for additional employees. Each 5% shift would open 1,500 spaces, equivalent to two parking structures, and allow downtown to accommodate a substantially larger workforce. It would reduce financial stress and turnover among hourly employees. The program would improve regional air quality. Because transportation is the largest contributor of carbon to the atmosphere, it would contribute to the city's goal of reducing greenhouse emissions.

In the year and a half since its inception, this increasingly popular program has shown success on all these fronts and more.

OUTCOME

CJI Research was hired by CCSID to conduct a commuter and employer survey in May 2019.

Its analysis showed ridership grew from 5% to between 10% and 14% among the eligible workforce. The Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) reported its highest ridership in 31 years and attributes that in part to the success of C-pass.

Seventeen companies—nearly a third of those who responded to the survey—say C-pass influenced their decision to either renew or sign a lease in a C-pass eligible building. This response is remarkable because it happened within the first year of the program.

Because C-pass provides a stable and dependable transportation option for downtown workers, 34% of companies report the program makes it easier to recruit and retain workers in a competitive labor market. More than 50% of surveyed companies report C-pass has boosted employee morale.

In addition, C-pass users switching from driving to COTA have collectively prevented the emission of an estimated 6.8 million pounds of CO₂.

The program has created a new constituency for public transit. Among the people who switched their commute from driving to transit, 80% earn more than \$50,000 per year and 19% more than \$100,000 per year. Local media, business leaders, and elected officials now view transit as an economic development tool.

The current program is funded through December 31, 2020. In February 2020, CCSID property owners agreed to extend the program another five years and double their financial contribution. The C-pass is on course to be self-funded.

EXECUTION

CCSID, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) and COTA worked diligently to roll out the program after two years of complex negotiations. From the time the contract was signed, the partners had six months to develop and launch the program.

MORPC created a C-pass portal where employers register and manage accounts for their employees. The portal communicates with COTA's system and fareboxes to validate transit passes on buses. MORPC and COTA provide data from these platforms that

allow CCSID to continually assess the program's progress.

Two months ahead of the launch, CCSID conducted information sessions in approximately 125 buildings to introduce the program to roughly 800 tenants. CCSID and COTA continue to promote the program through tabling sessions in commercial buildings, which has helped increase enrollment and C-pass usage.

CCSID created an online communications toolkit for employers that includes information about the program, posters, digital graphics, and videos to educate employees on how to ride the bus.

CCSID operates a customer service line to address issues with credentials, new employees, new employers, and other program inquiries. The program has validated CCSID as a credible problem-solving organization in the business community.

REPRESENTATION

The years leading up to the launch of the program were spent learning from a wide range of community members. CCSID held hundreds of meetings with downtown property owners, downtown tenants and employees (office, hospitality, retail, and restaurants), residents, city and county officials, community organizations and potential funders. Through MORPC's representation, regional municipalities and jurisdictions were also consulted.

CCSID formed an advisory committee that included representatives from the City of Columbus, United Way of Central Ohio, Smart Columbus, COTA, MORPC, downtown businesses and the hospitality industry, many of which employ workers from underserved communities. These members provided feedback on the program's development, eligibility, and marketing activities.

Program partners can confidently say the program and its success are a result of the comprehensive and inclusive engagement effort leading up to its launch.

CCSID provides the primary coordination and "front line" customer service for the program. CCSID and COTA continue to promote the program through tabling sessions in commercial building lobbies and direct outreach to brokers and new employers.

MORPC also continues to promote the program to its members through its monthly e-newsletter and Gohio social media platforms. This outreach has helped continue to increase enrollment and usage of C-pass.

REPLICATION

Downtown C-pass is a model for other cities with SIDs or BIDs that struggle with increased single-occupancy vehicle commutes, strained parking capacity, and an underutilized transit system. Columbus is an example of how a SID can use its special assessments to fund transit service. It's also an example to transit authorities of how powerful a partnership with the private sector can be.

C-pass is a relatively simple and cost-effective solution that can be used by any city with a transit system, regardless of the size of the city or transit system. CCSID has received inquiries from more than a dozen other cities interested in the program's background and structure with an eye towards replication.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The notion of incentivizing transit to address parking demands is straightforward and simple. However, assembling the deal was not.

It took CCSID two years of complex negotiations with COTA and tireless fundraising efforts to launch the program. Funding C-pass during its first three years required a combination of assessments, private contributions, and grants.

Providing common credentials for hundreds of employers and thousands of employees presented a significant challenge. COTA and MORPC provided in-kind technology assistance, building two separate software systems – one for participating companies to enroll eligible employees and the other to validate C-pass fare media on COTA fareboxes.

In addition to the funding support from MORPC, the partnership between MORPC and COTA to develop the two standalone systems that seamlessly communicate with each other to create a checks and balances platform for the program is a first, especially between a metropolitan planning organization and transit agency.