

Transit in the Parks: The Role of Foundations and the Private Sector

Katherine F. Turnbull, Texas Transportation Institute, The Texas A&M University System,
3135 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-3135; k-turnbull@tamu.edu

Introduction

ADDRESSING TRANSPORTATION ISSUES CONTINUES TO BE A MAJOR CONCERN AT MANY NATIONAL parks. Congested roads, overcrowded parking lots, exhaust fumes, and vehicles blocking scenic vistas all detract from the park experience. Working with local and state partners, the National Park Service (NPS) has implemented new shuttle bus services and other improvements to address these issues and to enhance visitor experiences. Foundations and the private sector are playing key roles in planning, funding, and promoting these new transit services.

This paper examines the support that foundations and the private sector are providing in planning, implementing, and operating the bus services at Acadia National Park, Zion National Park, and Colonial National Historical Park. Common themes are highlighted and applications to other parks are described. This paper is partially based on a report prepared by the author on a National Cooperative Highway Research Program project.¹

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. The case studies are presented next, focusing on the roles of foundations and the private sector in supporting transit services at the three national parks. The common themes emerging from the case studies are highlighted in the third section. The paper concludes with a discussion of areas for additional research.

Case studies

Acadia National Park. Acadia National Park comprises some 40,000 acres along the coast of Maine, including Mount Desert Island and other islands. Concerns arose in the 1980s about the ability of the carriage roads, small parking lots, and other facilities to accommodate the ever-increasing number of visitors and vehicles. The potential for an area-wide bus system was assessed as part of the park's general master planning process. A transit system concept was defined, but not pursued, until the local communities expressed interest in the concept as a way to address growing traffic and parking congestion in the area.

Initiated in 1999, the Island Explorer bus service represents the coordinated efforts of Acadia National Park, the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT), the Mount Desert Island League of Towns, Friends of Acadia, Downeast Transportation, local businesses, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). L.L.

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2012. *Rethinking Protected Areas in a Changing World: Proceedings of the 2011 George Wright Society Biennial Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*. Hancock, Michigan: The George Wright Society.
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Bean became the single corporate sponsor in 2002, providing significant financial resources for the system. The Island Explorer has expanded over time, serving both visitors and residents, and the partners continue to work together on additional improvements, including Acadia Gateway Center in Trenton, Maine.

Planning for the Island Explorer built upon the experience with a campground shuttle bus operated in the mid-1990s. A two dollar fare was charged for the campground shuttle, which was operated by Downeast Transportation. In response to survey results indicating more people would ride the campground shuttle if it was free, Friends of Acadia provided funding to subsidize the service, allowing for free service in 1997. Ridership on the campground shuttle increased by 600 percent during the first year of free service.

Park staff took the lead in the planning process, working with other partners. Acadia National Park continues to play a key role in funding the service, and working with other partners on improvements. MaineDOT assisted with planning the Island Explorer service, facilitated federal funding for the system, and provided state funding. MaineDOT continues to provide ongoing operation support through the allocation of FTA 5311 funding. MaineDOT is the lead agency in planning and developing the Acadia Gateway Center in Trenton.

The four towns on Mount Desert Island—Bar Harbor, Southwest Harbor, Mount Desert, and Tremont—and the surrounding communities of Trenton, Lamoine, and Cranberry Island collaborate as the Mount Desert Island League of Towns. The League implemented the Island Explorer service. In addition, the local communities support ongoing funding for operating the service. The communities have also participated in locating transit centers, stops, and other system elements. Tremont is a key partner in the development of the Acadia Gateway Center.

Downeast Transportation is a non-profit transit provider based in Ellsworth, Maine. Downeast Transportation operates the Island Explorer. Downeast Transportation is responsible for all aspects of operating and maintaining the Island Explorer bus system. In addition, it provides commuter, shopping, and shuttle services in the region.

Founded in 1986 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit charitable organization, Friends of Acadia has played an instrumental role in the development and ongoing operation of the Island Explorer bus system. Representatives of Friends of Acadia were actively involved in planning and implementing the system. The organization, which has approximately 3,500 members, has provided \$1.6 million in ongoing financial support for the Island Explorer through donations and other methods.²

Friends of Acadia played a key role in securing private funding for the service. It facilitated the initial \$1 million donation from L.L. Bean in 2002 to support the Island Explorer, and to establish the L.L. Bean Research Fellowship, and Kids in Acadia programs. Friends of Acadia also facilitated additional contributions from L.L. Bean, which now total \$2.25 million. In 2004, the organization secured a three-year option to purchase 369 acres at Crippens Creek in Trenton for the Acadia Gateway Center. Friends of Acadia acted on its option in 2007 and acquired the property. Since Acadia National Park cannot purchase land outside the established park boundaries, the action of Friends of Acadia was critical to develop the Gateway Center.

L.L. Bean is an outdoor apparel and equipment company based in Freeport, Maine. Founded in 1912, L.L. Bean has grown from a one-man operation to a global business, with annual sales of \$1.5 billion. With close to 3 million annual visitors to its store in Freeport, L.L. Bean and Acadia share honors as the most popular destinations in the state. Initially announced as its 90th anniversary gift to the state, the sponsorship of the Island Explorer and other programs reflects the company's values to promote recreation and sound stewardship of the nation's natural resources, and their corporate consciousness to help address local issues.

L.L. Bean became the sole corporate sponsor of the Island Explorer in 2002, and reaffirmed this commitment in 2005. The company's contributions have reached \$2.25 million for the

Island Explorer, Research Fellowship, and Kids in Acadia program. Island Explorer buses display the L.L. Bean logo, and L.L. Bean promotes its support of the bus system on its webpage, catalogues, and other marketing materials. The funding from L.L. Bean has been used to extend service later in the fall, to introduce a bicycle express service, and to match federal funds.

Implemented in the summer of 1999, with eight propane buses operating on six routes, the Island Explorer links hotels and businesses with key destinations in the park. A seventh route was added in 2000, and nine additional buses were purchased. With funding from L.L. Bean, the operating season was extended from Labor Day to mid-October in 2003. An eighth route serving the Schoodic Peninsula was introduced in 2004. The Bicycle Express was added in 2005, providing service between Bar Harbor Village Green and Eagle Lake, using a 12-passenger van and a bicycle trailer.

Ridership on the Island Explorer has grown from 142,000 passengers in 1999, to approximately 405,000 riders in 2008. By 2009, 3 million riders had used the service.³ The system averages some 4,980 passengers per day during the peak season, with the highest one-day total of 8,440 riders. In addition, the bicycle express transports over 12,000 bicycles during the summer.

Acadia National Park and its partners in the Island Explorer continue to consider service improvements, and opportunities to enhance the overall operation of the system. The Acadia Gateway Center in Trenton, which is under construction, will include the Acadia National Park transportation information center and an intermodal hub.

Colonial National Historical Park. Colonial National Historical Park occupies a peninsula between the James and York Rivers in Virginia. The three colonial settlements of Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown, which provide visitors with an understanding of the British colonial experience, represent major sites in the park. The 23-mile Colonial Parkway links these three sites, known as the Historical Triangle.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, traffic congestion during peak visitor times, and limited parking at many sites, focused attention on possible transit alternatives in the park. Construction of the new Jamestown Visitor Center, which removed 150 parking spaces from a 300-space lot and resulted in visitors parking in undesignated areas, increased the need for transit service in the park. The 400th anniversary celebration of the settlements in 2007, and the expected high-volume of tourists, further supported consideration of transit alternatives.

A pilot seasonal shuttle bus system, the Historic Triangle Shuttle, was implemented in 2004. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation operates the service, which is provided on two routes that originate at the Colonial Williamsburg Visitor Center and use the Colonial Parkway. One route provides service to Jamestown and the other route serves Yorktown. Both routes connect to local shuttle bus systems in Jamestown and Yorktown.

The Historic Triangle Shuttle represents a partnership among the Colonial National Historical Park, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the Williamsburg Area Transit Authority, and Preservation Virginia. Other partners include York County, the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, and the FTA.

Colonial National Historical Park took the lead in the planning process for the shuttle service with assistance from other partners. The park conducted a feasibility study, developed a plan, and completed an environmental assessment. It also led the effort to develop and submit the request for the new Jamestown Visitor Center, which included funding for the purchase of the shuttle buses and operation of the service until 2010.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation operates Colonial Williamsburg, a 300-acre historic area with restored, reconstructed, and historically furnished buildings. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation operates and maintains the Historic Triangle Shuttle through an annual cooperative agreement with the park. The Foundation also provided the 20 percent local match for the FTA funds.

The Williamsburg Area Transit Authority (WATA) operates the Williamsburg Trolley and other bus routes within its service area. Representatives from WATA were involved in the planning process for the Historical Triangle Shuttle. The WATA purchased the Historic Triangle Shuttle buses with FTA funding. It owns the buses and leases them to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Ridership on the shuttle has increased since the pilot was initiated in 2004. Approximately 67,520 passengers rode the shuttle in 2006. In 2007, which marked the 400th anniversary for the historic sites, ridership on the shuttle was approximately 172,200. In 2008, ridership declined to approximately 101,520 passengers.⁴

Zion National Park. Zion National Park encompasses 229 square miles of cliff-and-canyon landscape in southwestern Utah. Springdale is the gateway community for the park. Traffic congestion on the six-mile dead-end road in the main canyon, and a lack of parking led to the consideration of transit options in the 1990s.

A free shuttle bus system has been the only means of transportation for summer visitors to Zion Canyon since 2000. Buses traverse the roadway from 6:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., providing access to hiking trails, scenic view points, and Zion Lodge. Overnight guests at Zion Lodge are the only visitors allowed to drive private vehicles on the roadway.

A second shuttle bus route serves the gateway community of Springdale. The two routes connect at the Zion Canyon visitor center allowing passengers to transfer between the two loops. Additional parking spaces were constructed at the center as part of the shuttle bus system. Frequent service, averaging every six minutes or less during peak times, is provided on both loops, using propane-powered buses and trailers.

Ridership on the shuttles has increased since 2000. In 2001, some 2.13 million trips were made on the shuttles. In 2008, 3 million trips were taken on the shuttle buses. It is estimated that visitors on the Canyon Loop average three to four trips a day on the shuttle.⁵

Planning, funding, and implementing the shuttle system in the park and Springdale represent the coordinated efforts of Zion National Park, the National Park Service's Denver Service Center, Springdale, the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), FHWA, Zion National History Association (ZNHA), local businesses, and other groups. Zion National Park purchased the shuttle buses with McDonald Transit Associates, Inc. to operate the service. Springdale obtained federal Transportation Enhancement program funds through UDOT for the bus shuttle stops and related streetscape improvements, which were matched by city and ZNHA funds.

Established in 1929, the ZNHA is a non-profit organization supporting education, research, publication, and other programs for the benefit of Zion National Park, Cedar Breaks National Monument, and Pipe Spring National Monument. ZNHA supported the shuttle project and contributed to the local match for the federal enhancement funds. The ZNHA provides information about the shuttle on its website, along with energy-saving transportation tips.

Zion Canyon Theater, which is located adjacent to the park, was an early partner in the planning process. The ultimate project used private funds to construct the town shuttle loop northern terminal, a camper store and restaurant, and tour bus parking area. These improvements directly connect to the park visitor center, providing a park and gateway community link. Other local businesses participated in the planning process, and continue to be actively involved in supporting the shuttle system and the Springdale Loop.

Common themes

A number of common themes emerge from the three case studies. First, the case studies highlight the importance of partnerships. These partnerships involve the parks, federal, state, and local governments, and local foundations, organizations, businesses, and corporations. It takes time to

establish trust and build strong working relationships among these diverse groups. This time is well spent, however, and is critical to the ongoing success of transit services in the parks.

Second, the case studies illustrate the important role foundations play in supporting transit services in the parks. These organizations can undertake and facilitate many activities that parks and other government agencies cannot. Foundations can also help in fund raising, managing funding from other sources, and purchasing property. Third, although not all parks have an L.L. Bean in their backyard, involving the business community is important to obtaining support, and possibly funding, for transit projects.

Finally, the case studies highlight the importance of leveraging resources and expertise. Given budget constraints at all levels of government and the sluggish economy, innovative financing and maximizing funding from multiple sources is critical. Leveraging staff resources and expertise among agencies and groups is also important.

Additional research

The three case studies presented in this paper also highlight areas for further research. First, examining the experience with transit systems in other national parks and federal lands would be beneficial to further explore the role of foundations and the private sector.

Second, examining additional roles for foundations and the private sector would be of use. This analysis could include identifying additional techniques for leveraging resources and maximizing funding from multiple sources.

Endnotes

1. Texas Transportation Institute and Cambridge Systematics, Inc., *Innovative Transportation Planning Partnerships to Enhance National Parks and Gateway Communities*, National Cooperative Highway Research Program Project 8-36, Task 83 (Washington, DC, October, 2009).
2. Friends of Acadia website, www.friendsofacadia.org/25th_Anniversary/anniversary_timeline.shtml.
3. Friends of Acadia, *2010 Accomplishments* (Bar Harbor, ME: Friends of Acadia, 2010).
4. National Park Service, Colonial National Historical Park, Public Transportation, www.nps.gov/colo/planyourvisit/publictransportation.htm.
5. National Park Service, Zion National Park, Zion Canyon Shuttle System, www.nps.gov/zion/planyourvisit/zion-canyon-shuttle-system.htm.