

Florida Today Hosts Business Of Transit Stakeholders Summit

Brevard forms "Transit One", A Council for Transit Advocacy

Space Coast Area Transit and reThink, FDOT's District 5 Commuter Assistance program, kicked off the New Year by co-sponsoring a Community Stakeholders Summit. Florida Today Executive Editor Bob Gabordi moderated the interactive panel discussion entitled "Transit's Economic Benefits". Panel members included: Brevard County Commission Chairman Jim Barfield, FPTA Executive Director Lisa Bacot, Space Coast TPO Executive Director Bob Kamm, Eastern Florida State College VP of Communications John Glisch, Assistant Brevard County Manager Venetta Valdengo, City of Melbourne Vice Mayor Dan Porsi, NASA Transportation Officer Bruce Chesson, reThink Program Manager Courtney Reynolds and Space Coast Area Transit Director Jim Liesenfelt.



Over 120 attendees represented a wide cross section of the community. Each municipality was represented, as was the Canaveral Port Authority, the Brevard County School Board, the Viera TMA, Community Redevelopment Agencies, Tourism Council members, not-for-profit organizations, and numerous employers. Participants received an education on transit's local, regional, and state-wide economic benefits, then continued the transit discussion in vanpools while on

their way to a luncheon co sponsored by Space Coast Advertising and Clear Channel Outdoor.

Jim Liesenfelt, Director of Space Coast Area Transit, started the interactive panel discussion by sharing that Brevard's boarding rates were higher per hour than those in Houston or Minneapolis/St. Paul, and that the number of cash transactions facilitated on their buses each day were equal to those of an average Super Wal-Mart. He went on to say that, "The transit system employs over

150 people with an 8.6 million dollar operating and maintenance budget. More than 80 % of that 8.6 million comes from revenue sources outside Brevard County, while conversely, almost 100% of that 8.6 million dollars is spent inside Brevard County." FPTA Director Lisa Bacot provided an even broader perspective: "Nationwide, transit directly employs 400,000 people, and in the state of Florida, 35,000 people. That is just direct employment, not including the thousands of private sector jobs. 66 billion dollars is generated by private sector sales in transit related items each year. We have over 130 FPTA business members. That's because they know transit systems need their products and services."

The Vice-Mayor of Melbourne referred to his City's transit investment an economic development strategy stating, "We are able to have better jobs and a way people get to them." Bob Kamm, Space Coast TPO's Executive Director, followed up by adding, "We all understand there is a linkage between jobs and transit, but in the past, we've been justifying transit as more of a social service. That's just not cutting it anymore. It has to be identified as a component of economic prosperity and job creation." Kamm praised FDOT District 5 for creating a first-of-its-kind

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analyst tool that will enable justification of new or existing routes, based on estimated economic impact. "It's something that is extremely important for us to do," he said.

At the close of the summit, Assistant Brevard County Manager Venetta Valdengo announced the formation of a new community coalition called Transit One, a non-governmental organization that is intended to bring a diverse group of transit-interested parties together. "Transit is a vital lifeline for so many people; it's almost a public utility," she stated. "It demands bold, creative ways of thinking." Valdengo envisions Transit One as being a bridge that helps determine how the community wants to move forward with transit, as well as identifying the funding sources that can be used to turn that plan into reality.

Brevard County Commission Chairman Jim Barfield referred to Space Coast Area Transit's 2013 - 2022 Transit Development Plan as "not being worth the paper it's written on" because there is no funding mechanism attached to it. "What I want to make sure I am clear about today is that now is the time to take action," he said. Time is just wasting away.

I applaud Venetta's efforts. By bringing the community together with Transit One, that's how we solve problems," he emphatically stated.

Courtney Reynolds, reThink Program Manager and one of the event organizers, voiced that she was thrilled to see over half of the summit attendees sign up to participate in Transit One. "One of our goals for this year's summit was to determine if support for more transit service was in line with the interests of Space Coast Area Transit's stakeholders. Now that stakeholder support is apparent, they can take that conversation to the next level," she said.

As a direct result of the summit, the TPO Technical and Citizen Advisory Committee voted to recommend the addition of a priority action item to the TPO's 2016 strategic plan: Explore opportunities to expand transit services and funding. At the next TPO meeting—and to the delight of transit supporters—the priority action item passed unanimously. Transit One will hold its first meeting in March. "We recognize these are small steps," Liesenfelt said. "But you can't have that giant leap until you start the walk." Bacot added, "And that's exactly why explaining the economic benefits of transit is so important. I wish more communities were doing this!"

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