

Let's Talk Transit Speakers Bureau: Report on 2017 Pilot Project

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On Behalf of Transportation Riders United

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite important upcoming transit funding decisions, many people in southeast Michigan have little knowledge of public transportation. That is why TRU developed a peer-to-peer speakers bureau program to educate and engage with these residents.

Initial results found the program to be quite effective, with 90.6% of participants reporting that they learned from it and 73.8% more likely to support transit funding in the future. Therefore, we seek to continue and expand this program to ensure a more informed electorate in advance of future regional transit funding ballot measures.

Transportation Riders United (TRU) is a Detroit-based nonprofit organization dedicated since 1999 to improving and promoting public transit throughout greater Detroit in order to restore urban vitality, ensure transportation equity, and improve quality of life.

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Introduction

In November 2016, a Regional Transit ballot measure that would have greatly expanded transit access and opportunities in Southeast Michigan lost by a narrow margin, in large part because many voters know too little about transit and its benefits to them, their community, and the region.

That's why in September 2017 Transportation Riders United launched the "Let's Talk Transit" Speakers Bureau. This effort is a peer-to-peer community engagement program designed to enlist 18,000 voters across the RTA region in discussing the importance and benefits of regional transit. Furthermore, the program seeks to know these constituents' opinions on how transit could best benefit them and their community and to help communicate them to transit decision makers.

This report summarizes the three-month pilot of that program, including how it was developed, the types of information presented, feedback received, and plans from here.

Preparing Effective Messages

TRU began by identifying what information was most critical for people to understand. We created a presentation to dispel common myths and misperceptions about transit by replacing them with facts, discuss the regional transit plan, and to invite audience feedback.

Examples of myth countering include:

- Myth: "Everyone around here drives."
 - **Fact: *One-third of our society can't drive.***
- Myth: "We don't have any mass transit."
 - **Fact: *Public transit in SE MI provides over 150,000 rides a day.***
- Myth: "Transit doesn't matter to employers."
 - **Fact: *Businesses struggle to get reliable workers and attract top talent without regional transit.***

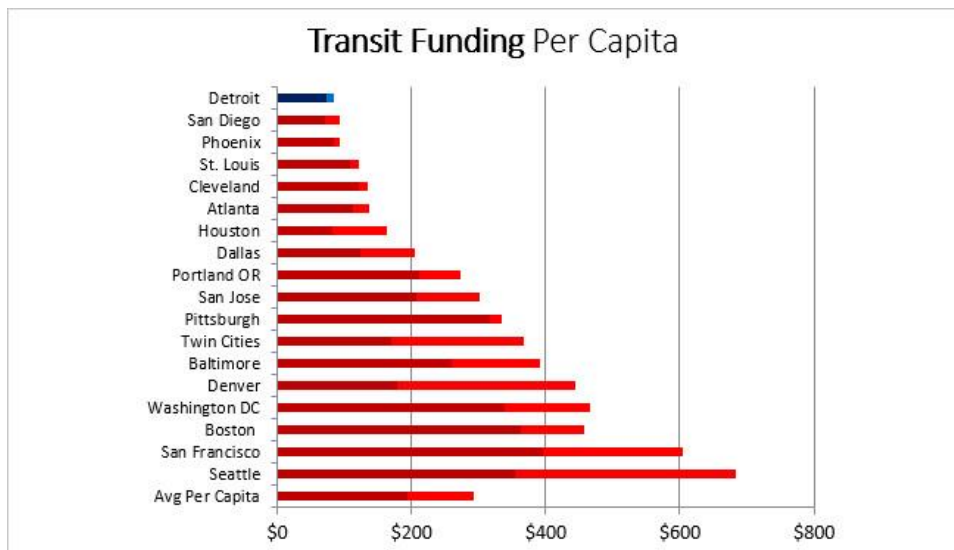
Another myth refuted is that auto companies don't support transit. This slide (shown below) prominently displays the logos of fifteen major organizations that endorsed the 2016 transit campaign, including Ford and GM.

Myth: The Auto Companies Don't Want It.

Fact: They endorsed the 2016 transit campaign.



In addition to the myth vs. fact data of the presentation, TRU introduces the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) and the Regional Transit Plan it developed. We included comparative data, including per capita transit spending by metropolitan area (below). Important illustrations, like Dallas's business and economic success relevant to rapid transit implementation, highlight the real-life meaning of the facts presented.



Finally, TRU presenters explain that the RTA and elected leaders are debating potential changes to the existing plan and invite the audience to share their suggestions and ideas. We do this both by asking for questions and comments at the conclusion of the presentation and by passing out a survey that includes questions inviting more detailed feedback or specific recommendations.

TRU understands that people learn in a variety of ways and that some methods of retaining of information work better for some than they do for others. To ensure we have tools that fit various learning styles, we also distribute a handout that concisely summarizes the key points of the presentation and the facts about transit most crucial for sharing with others.

The Human Force Behind the Message

The next step of TRU's development of the Let's Talk Transit Speakers Bureau was identifying and bringing together people to share this message. TRU identified people who care deeply about transit and those it impacts and who have public speaking and community engagement skills. The diversity of stakeholders investing in the "Let's Talk Transit" effort is a testament to the all-encompassing benefit of regional transit. These "Transit Ambassadors" come through a variety of ways, including TRU board members, partner organizations, presentation attendees who marked interest, and an online interest form from TRU's website.



Once potential speakers have been identified, TRU trains these volunteers in how to effectively communicate facts about transit and to engage with audiences to acquire useful feedback. During training, the standard presentation is also modified to each volunteer's personal style and unique connection to transit to maximize effectiveness. The training process includes an initial review and discussion of the presentation and ways to customize or make it their own; watching the presentation performed by an already trained presenter at a public venue; practicing the presentation to an audience of peers; and finally, presenting on one's own. To date, the program has fifteen volunteers ranging in interest from lawyers to social workers and in age, from college students to seniors. Two of these volunteers have presented so far, while others are still in initial discussion or practicing phases of the training process.

Engaging Community Group Audiences

TRU then identified potential venues for “Let’s Talk Transit” presentations ranging from rotary clubs and city chambers to unions and democratic clubs. Presentation venues were identified by their being structured to include regularly scheduled guest speakers, and by their geographic and political relevancy to public transit education. Kiwanis clubs, neighborhood associations, faith organizations, and other advocacy groups are also among groups identified that would be interested in knowing more about transit. In short, the intent is to reach as many people as possible, particularly those with little experience or knowledge of public transit.

In three short months of implementation, 125 potential presentation venues have been identified, with more being added weekly. While most volunteers are still receiving initial training, ten presentations have already been delivered across the region. Cities of venues presented to so far include, Birmingham, Dearborn, Farmington Hills, Livonia, Rochester Hills, Royal Oak, Sterling Heights, Waterford, and West Bloomfield. Audience sizes have ranged from 6 to 45 people, with a grand total 162 people having heard our message so far and equipped with the transit facts provided in our presentation handout.

Audience Feedback

Finally, TRU integrated methods for gathering and evaluating feedback from audience members into the program. **Pilot results to date have shown the Let’s Talk Transit Speakers Bureau to be very effective.** To ensure the program goal is being met, we designed feedback surveys that assess its capacity to inform and influence which we collect after every presentation. The brief, half sheet survey collects only the most essential information for evaluation and improvement of the program.

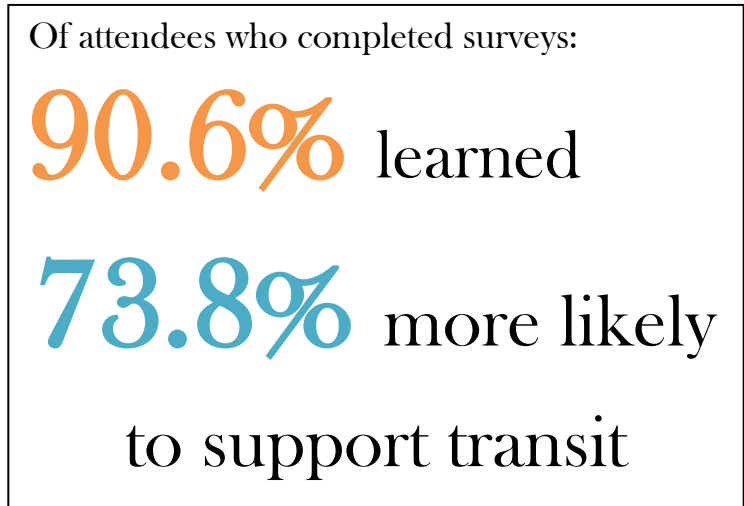
“If I would have seen your presentation before, I would have voted for transit!”

Presentation attendee verbal feedback

Of 85 survey responses received so far, 90.6% said they learned from it. Of this percentage, 68% stated they definitely learned more, while 22% said they learned a little more.

Additionally, 73.8% of survey respondents said they are more likely to support transit than they were before the presentation. Of this percentage, 55% said they were much more likely to, while 18% said they were a little more likely to. It's also worth noting that many who answered that they were neither more or less likely to support transit after seeing the presentation commented that they already supported transit before the presentation.

The desire to stay informed is also evidenced by the 53.6% of survey respondents who provided their email address to receive transit updates.



Additionally, audience survey feedback provides a unique opportunity to gather specific criticism and suggestions that shed light on community-based issues surrounding transit. The invitation to provide meaningful commentary is emphasized to audiences in the hopes of obtaining a practical perspective of transit impact on specific communities. As seen in the following survey comments, feedback of this type is invaluable to transit advocacy efforts:

In Royal Oak:

- *Start with Walking Man. This is real life. These are the people. The working people.*
- *#1 issue is explaining why public transit should be paid for by tax dollars instead of out of fare box. It is not enough to say almost all public transit systems in the world receive public support. The question is WHY. The answer is the public benefit which needs to be explained in detail.*

In Dearborn:

- *Should talk about fact that young people and investors will not come to Detroit region due to perception of lack of mass transit.*
- *Having 3 daughters with anxiety (1 still doesn't drive) and as a school social worker I see how emotional as well as physical handicaps prevent people from driving. And of course, the obvious socioeconomic segregation that occurs and limits people from accessing jobs, entertainment, etc.*

At the Livonia Chamber of Commerce:

- *As you prepare for ballots, probably should focus on the relative affordability to individuals vs. the status quo.*
- *Add cost value to the presentation that transit brings to communities*

As more survey feedback is accumulated, cultural and sectional patterns of thought regarding transit will be identified. Furthermore, TRU will influence opinion regarding transit through clear, persuasive information and greatly expanding the program to reach thousands more.

Program Expansion

Continuing into 2018, TRU is scheduling more presentations and more venues are being recommended at each presentation. By asking audience members for recommendations of other groups that should hear the Let's Talk Transit message, or that TRU could benefit from hearing from, the program has grown. Scheduled presentations for a Kiwanis club and for a church's Peace and Justice group are examples of this feedback feature's sustainment capability.

The Speaker's Bureau volunteer base is also growing. As identified on the presentation feedback surveys, six individuals indicated they want to learn more about being a transit ambassador for their community. Additionally, eight audience members indicated that they want to donate to TRU to enable more transit education and advocacy. There have even been a number of presentation attendees who offered their personal assistance in connecting with other people, or groups, that they are involved with.

In conclusion, **the first three months of the Let's Talk Transit Volunteers Speakers Bureau has been a success.** While the development of any program involves initial time for systematizing and process adjustment, **the outcomes reached so far show great promise.**

TRU looks forward to expanding and energizing transit advocacy through the program in 2018.