

Vanpools: A Viable Option in Rural Regions

by Amy Conrick

Long before the term *mobility manager* became fashionable, Ed Frost and Dave Rodrick of Ben Franklin Transit (BFT) in the Tri-Cities area of Washington State were putting that concept into practice. To them, every customer need is one that they will do everything they can to meet. Nowhere is this *can-do* attitude more prevalent than in the agency's innovative rural vanpool program.

Ben Franklin Transit's fixed-route and demand-response service operates throughout largely rural Benton and Franklin Counties – hence the system's name, Ben Franklin Transit – in south central Washington State, with service stretching into three neighboring counties as well. The main economic corridor in the system's service area is located along the Columbia River, and is centered around the Tri-Cities area – Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland. The vanpool program almost doubles the agency's operational area, traveling in two states – Washington and Oregon – eight counties, and 12 cities.

The region's most notable employment center is the 586-square-mile Department of Energy Hanford site in the north end of the county – a weapons-grade plutonium-producing plant created as part of the Manhattan Project in 1943 that is now an EPA Superfund site. At its peak, the Hanford site employed 20,000 people and produced weapons-grade plutonium; it is now the work destination for 5,000 employees. Other major county employers include the McNary Dam and four other dams along the Columbia River, several agricultural operations and wineries, the Washington State Penitentiary, and the Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility just across the border in Oregon.

The State Role

The Washington State Department of Transportation entered the vanpool arena in the early 1980s, when all



Ben Franklin Transit's vanpool network covers eight counties and travelled more than 3 million miles in 2007.

states received compensation from lawsuits against the oil companies for overcharging consumers for fuel. The state decided that it would return the money to residents by improving transportation services, particularly in the congested Puget Sound area that was facing air quality and other environmental challenges. In 1982, the state chose to use some of that funding to seed vanpool programs across the state. Seattle's King County Metro was one of the first transit agencies in the nation to begin a vanpooling operation. The King County program was first funded directly by the county and then expanded with state support into the largest program in Washington, and then the largest publicly operated vanpool program in the United States.

Through the oil settlement, the Benton-Franklin Council of Governments received two 15-passenger vans for use in a two-year demonstration project. The vanpool service ran between the Tri-Cities area and the Hanford site and supplemented U.S. Department of Energy-funded bus service in the same area. In 1983, Ed Frost, as Ben Franklin Transit's manager of transit development and now manager of the nascent vanpool program, embraced the opportunity being offered by the state and expanded the vanpool program.

"Initially there was resistance to including vanpools as a full third leg of

transit service, in addition to fixed-route and demand-response service. However, I wanted to move the agency beyond offering traditional bus-only operations into the business of moving people, with no bias as to the type of mode," says Frost.

One of the greatest needs for transportation in the Tri Cities area was an economical means of moving hundreds of workers to the major industrial employment sites located within a 150-mile radius of the area. The dispersed nature of the businesses and a lack of DOE permits to many areas on the secured Hanford site ruled out commuter bus service.

"The smaller, flexible, more cost-effective, employee-operated vanpools were exactly the answer the region needed," says Frost.

In 2003, the Washington State Legislature, recognizing the impact local vanpooling programs were making in their region, approved a 10-year program to assist agencies in expanding their programs. Through this arrangement, the state supports the cost of vans to transit agencies and retains ownership of the vans. The transit agencies then put the vans in operation, recovering costs through fares and federal funding, returning a 25 percent match to the state over a five-year period. The state also gives transit agencies the option to spend

the 25 percent match in support of their vanpooling operations – for example, marketing the vanpool service locally or statewide or developing local park-and-ride lots. At the end of the 5-year period, the agencies either own the vehicles outright or do so after paying some residual capital costs.

The state Commute Trip Reduction Board is charged with administering the funds to help transit agencies grow their vanpool programs. Each year the board looks at the size of each agency's vanpool waiting list, the degree of congestion in the corridors they serve, the needs of workers for supplemental transit services, and other criteria in allocating funds to agencies for purchasing vans, based on a maximum cost of \$26,000 per van. If agencies – through the state contract with vendors or through a competitive bid process – can purchase vehicles for less than \$26,000, they are allowed to amend their agreement with the state to purchase vehicles beyond the funded-equivalent number of vans.

This state funding can be used to expand fleets only, and is not to replace older vans. From the beginning of the program, the state established the

policy that transit agencies should plan to generate enough revenue over the life of a van to fund its replacement. At Ben Franklin Transit, vanpool fares cover some of the capital costs, plus insurance and operating costs, but not administrative costs. About one-third of the system's federal funding pot is used in the vanpool program as well.

Phenomenal Growth

By 1985, when Dave Rodrick took over as the Rideshare Supervisor, BFT's fleet had grown to 32 vehicles, one full-time coordinator, and another staff member contributing several hours of her time daily. The main clients were still the federal government sites: the Hanford facility, the dams, and the state penitentiary.

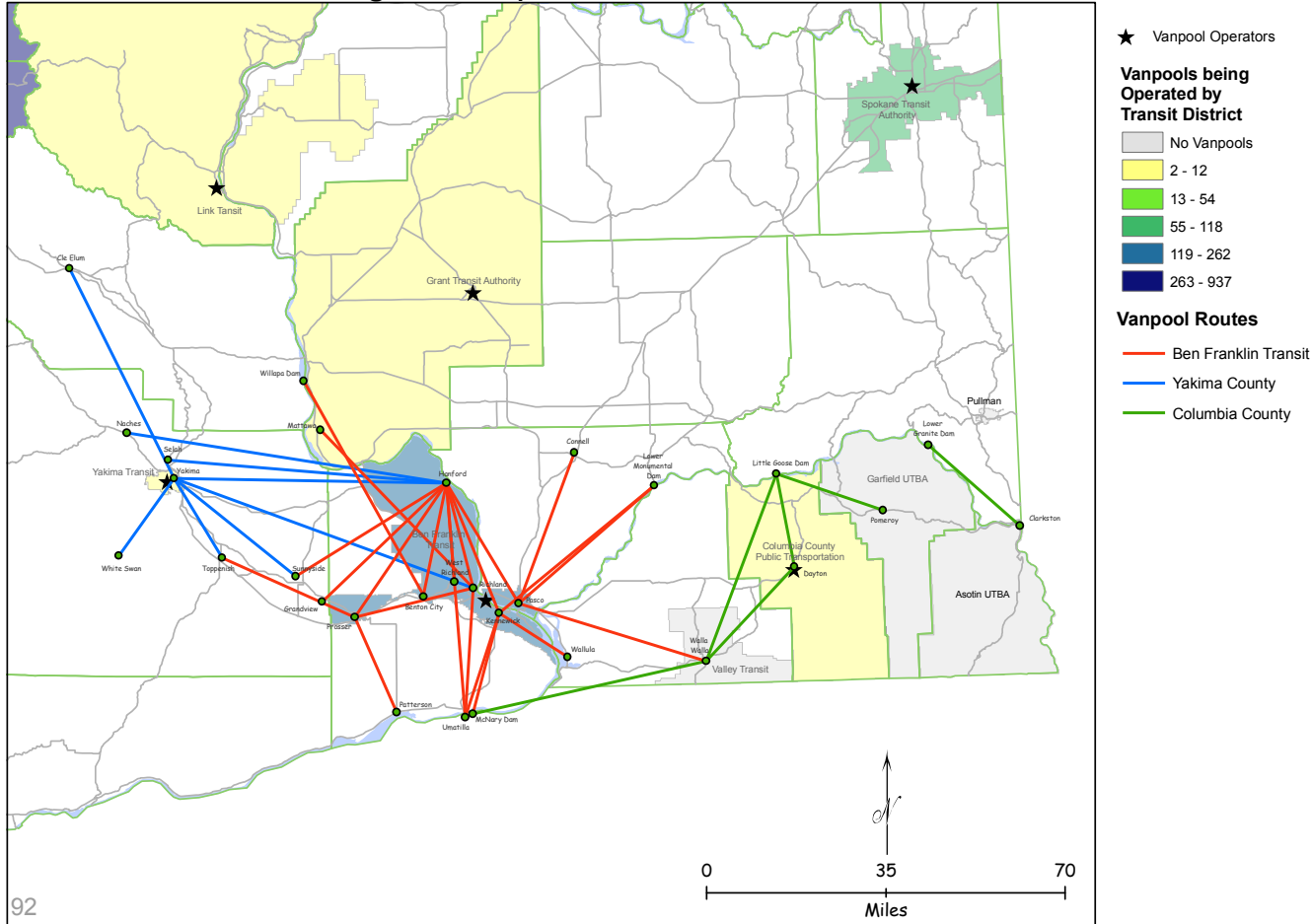
A Decade later, in 1995, the DOE ceased offering bus service for its employees, who immediately began searching for a new affordable, shared-ride alternative. Using leased vans, Ben Franklin Transit quickly increased its fleet to accommodate the need, and eventually purchased 38 new vans.

The program came across a significant

opportunity in 2004 when Bechtel opened a new vitrification plant with several hundred employees. Once again BFT ramped up its program, renting and leasing additional vans to accommodate the need. However, in August 2005, this portion of the vanpooling program hit a bump in the road that shook up the agency's vanpool operation. Bechtel announced that it would have to significantly reduce staffing at the plant for six months to a year to perform additional seismic studies. At the same time, Bechtel lost engineers who moved to jobs in New Orleans to help redesign that city's canal system after Hurricane Katrina. This meant that about 45 new vanpool groups no longer needed vans, leaving BFT without users for half of its total vanpool fleet.

Rodrick, far from panicking, came to see a new opportunity in this unforeseen development. He instructed his staff to go out far and wide and speak to the many area employers that were not being served by the vanpool program. And reach out they did—to the state prison, the wineries, the orchards, and many other sites. By the end of 2006, all those 45 vans were back in circulation and, by late 2007, a waiting list for

South Central Washington Vanpools



vans had formed among riders who had heard about the program and wanted to participate. A more rural program emerged.

Since that time when Ben Franklin Transit's vanpool program was fortuitously pushed toward diversification, it has blossomed into the fourth largest vanpool program in the state. In 2007, BFT's vans traveled 3 million miles and generated \$1.2 million in fare box revenue. The precipitous rise in gasoline prices from 2006 to today has made the low cost of the vanpool option stand out even more starkly in comparison to drive-alone costs.

The agency currently has a waitlist of 224 – not individuals, but groups – for its vans. To increase its fleet, Rodrick recently instructed his staff to comb the state and other vanpool programs for additional surplus vans that it could lease. The agency located a handful of these vans from a large-urban program, refurbished them, and put them on the road. It is now negotiating the purchase of those vans to permanently add them to its fleet.

Ben Franklin Transit was also able to acquire 102 new vans in September and is in the processing of contacting the thrilled waitlist members, some who have been on the list for seven-to-nine months. These vehicles will be added to the agency's current stock of 302 vans. The state has allocated an additional eight vans in 2009. Newer vans are given to vanpool groups based on seniority, with the older vehicles being given to the new groups, and the oldest vehicles being auctioned.

How It Works

Vanpool drivers' employment and driving histories are checked at their initial enrollment in the program, and their driving records are rechecked each year. All new drivers must attend a driver's workshop, which covers defensive driving with hands-on practice, maintenance, accident procedures, and more. Veteran drivers are invited to attend a refresher course every three years. Vanpool drivers and coordinators ride the vans for free; however, in some vans the drivers choose to contribute to the costs as a way of keeping the fares lower for all riders.

Most of the van drivers park the vans at home overnight, whereas others take

advantage of the park-and-ride lot across from the system's headquarters. Personal use of the van by drivers is not permitted. About one-third of the vanpool groups fuel at the system's on-site fuel depot, and the others receive gas cards for fuel – drivers are encouraged to use Ben Franklin Transit's fuel to keep costs down.

Riders are billed monthly for a base cost plus per-mile rate. They are not required to remain in a vanpool for any minimum amount of time, but experience has shown that most who begin with a vanpool are committed to its success given the significant cost and time savings that accrue to them. After participating in the vanpool program for six consecutive months, passengers are qualified to take or save one free week of vacation credit so that they do not lose their spot on the van during personal travel. The system also offers a guaranteed ride home program to all vanpool customers. Vanpools can even request a bicycle rack to be installed on their vans.

Fares cover capital costs, insurance, maintenance, the cost of a guaranteed ride home program, and fuel. Fees are charged as a fixed cost plus per-mile rate that varies by the size of the vehicle and number of days the van operates per year. For example, the rate for a 15-passenger van traveling 100 miles a day is \$826.10 a month – or an average of \$59.00 permonth when divided by 14 passengers.

In an area as rural as many parts of southeast Washington State, commuting by vanpool is often the only cost-efficient mode. The system's vans travel to destinations as far as Umatilla, Ore. – a 150-mile round trip – and Walla Walla, Wash., a 90-mile round-trip. One 12-passenger van of teachers who travel 140 miles round-trip pay \$135.25 for 21 days, the price of gas alone for a single vehicle round trip along this same route would cost \$19 or \$399 each 21-day month.

Some employers help to subsidize the vanpool costs for their employees. For example, because of the limited parking within its secured site, Bechtel promotes vanpooling by subsidizing all vans for \$300 per month, leaving employees to pay approximately \$24 per rider each month. About 90 vans travel to Bechtel's vitrification plant – a specialized facility that converts dangerous waste to glass

– and that number is expected to grow in the next two years. McNary Dam was the first area employer to pay the maximum commuter benefit allowed by federal law (currently \$115/month) for its vanpooling employees, and the U.S. Army does the same for workers traveling to its Yakima Firing Center.

“Without Good Customer Service, We Would Not Exist”

What makes Ben Franklin Transit unique? An answer to this question must start with the way Frost and Rodrick approach to business.

“Customer service is not a buzz word, it is a truthful passion. It's easy to sell the vanpooling concept in congested areas. But we're in the desert. So we've got to live and breathe customer service,” says Rodrick. “We're in the business of integrity. These customers who pay us in advance for their ride expect us to be there. They don't want to be bothered with the agency's problems. If we develop a history of poor or no service, then we have lost our integrity, people stop believing in us and our service, and we lose our service. Our goal is to get the people moving as quickly as we can. We sell this self-service product in advance by the month, so it's got to work.”

And the results are clear: in a recent customer-satisfaction survey on the vanpooling program, customers awarded the program a 98 percent approval rating.

The agency's staff is innovative in their approach to challenges that arise and attention to individual customers is always expected. When the vanpool program was in its early stages, the staff would even assist in cleaning the vans!

Rodrick and Frost made choices early on to make the vanpool program as responsive to customers as possible. For example, when selecting the vehicle type to replace the original vanpool vehicle, Rodrick invited the manufacturers to drive their vans to the system's site and then had passengers view them and choose which they preferred. The vanpool customers made some surprising choices. Rodrick and Frost were sure that cup holders would be an essential feature on the vans, as they envisioned customers drinking morning coffee while they read newspapers and traded news. However, when they pointed out this feature to one of their long-time customers, she looked at them and

asked, “What do we need cup holders for? We all sleep!”

Vanpool customers also value the flexibility that the vanpools give them; for example, a group can choose to stop at a donut shop every Friday morning or to all work late at crunch times.

When Frost heard that local seasonal employees, working in the vineyard and orchards were paying \$5 each way to travel to-and-from work, he sought and received a grant from the state to subsidize a vanpool for the employees. In its first year, Ben Franklin Transit paid for half of the cost, reducing the workers’ payments to \$34 per month. In the second year the subsidy will be 25 percent and in the third year there will be no subsidy. The four 15-passenger vans serve 35-45 employees who travel from 10 to 35 miles one-way to work.

As is the case with many rural transit operators, Ben Franklin Transit’s customers have adopted an ownership attitude toward *their* vans. For example, customers often take an active approach when their van develops a problem, working with transit maintenance staff to determine the best course of action instead of automatically demanding a replacement van.

The MegaVan

In response to the high demand for vanpool services, in 1996 BFT experimented by purchasing the MegaVan – a body-on-chassis vehicle that is now the envy of vanpoolers in the region. As a 25-seater, the van is the most roomy and cost-efficient for the riders.

In 1995, after the DOE ceased supporting the Hanford site with bus service, four groups of commuters approached the BFT board to ask them to take over the route. Frost and Rodrick developed four scenarios for self-sustaining operations to present to the customers. When it was clear that commuter bus service would be one of the most expensive options, the customers and BFT began looking at vanpooling. However the customers, used to a large bus, did not want to ride in a 12- or 15-passenger van. Frost and Rodrick had heard about the MegaVan and thought it might be the answer, particularly if the capital cost was amortized over 10 years and the users supplied their own CDL-licensed driver. The commuters liked the idea of the



Ben Franklin Transit’s vanpool team, including Ed Frost (center) and Dave Rodrick (right).

MegaVan and showed their commitment by immediately writing checks to cover the first month of operation. Rodrick located a MegaVan that had been used by a New Jersey transit pilot operation and, following board approval, put it on the road in 1996. The service has been successful from day one.

The MegaVan carries employees of Fluor Hanford and contractors from the Tri-Cities area to the Hanford site each day. Because it provides cost-effective, efficient, comfortable service, turnover in MegaVan passengers is rare; in fact, three of the passengers are original riders. Currently there is a 20-person waitlist to join the van, which is completely full an average of four days a week. On days when there are spots available, the van takes on day riders, who pay \$3 each way, at the last local stop in Richland before traveling to the Hanford site. This practice led to another shared-ride opportunity for three daily riders who eventually decided to begin carpooling together.

Pam Doran, a Fluor Hanford employee and a rider who serves as the vanpool coordinator, manages the list of riders, collects payments, and schedules the drivers. She submits a list of riders’ names and payments each month to Ben Franklin Transit with their checks. Pam says she is happy to spend the approximate three hours per month it takes to administer the service, using her personal time to do so.

Many other agencies have approached

Frost and Rodrick about their MegaVan component, but not many have added a similar vehicle to their fleet. The main challenges to doing so seem to be the requirement for a CDL-certified driver – the system requires the MegaVan to have four identified drivers – which necessitates significant training and drug and alcohol testing.

The Sit-n-Lift Minivan

Another innovation with the Ben Franklin Transit’s vanpool program is its Sit-n-Lift minivan used by the Kadlec Medical Center to transport employees to work and to move employees and patients throughout the center’s extensive campus. This lift-equipped, seven-passenger minivan has a swing-out seat that can be used to transfer non-ambulatory patients between buildings but can also serve as a regular seat. The van is driven by hospital employees, who are trained by the transit system as drivers and by Kadlec to provide medical services.

The van also promotes shared ride modes among medical center employees, as it provides an alternative means for employees traveling around campus, thus eliminating the need for them to drive their own vehicle to work. Finally, the van functions as a vanpool to-and-from work, with commuters’ fares covering the capital cost of the van as well as insurance and maintenance costs; Kadlec pays for the all operating costs. The van has 18,000 boardings per year.

Finding Partners

In 2001, Ben Franklin Transit expected a significant decrease in its state funding when voters chose to reduce license plate fees, thus cutting transit investment by one-third. Frost and Rodrick saw this loss of funding as a threat to the level of service they could provide to not only fixed-route customers but also to people with disabilities. Working closely with The ARC of the Tri-Cities and the three major destinations for people with disabilities—Goodwill, Columbia Industries, and Adult Day Services—the transit system was able to develop a hybrid vanpool-lease program operated by The ARC to fill the gap. To facilitate the arrangement, Frost was able to broker a deal with BFT's bus drivers' union by demonstrating to the union that the deal would not cost the drivers any jobs and giving the union the right to come back and reclaim control over the service if it chose to do so in the future.

Under the arrangement, the ARC leases and operates vans from Ben Franklin Transit and serves as a paratransit contractor. The ARC leases two high-top lift vans and 18 cutaway lift vans and pays insurance and a per-mile cost on them; BFT continues to provide the maintenance. The ARC then charges the system a set per-boarding cost. With the service, Ben Franklin Transit is able to save about \$800,000 in projected paratransit operational costs, savings that are used to expand its ADA-complementary paratransit service.

All told, these vehicles transport more than 300 people on a regular basis. Supplemental vehicles needed to accommodate the ARC's Partners and Pals summer camp for adults with disabilities are taken from the system's fleet, the need for which is slightly reduced over the summer months. Drivers are employees of The ARC, trained by BFT and CDL licensed. The best part of the deal is that drivers, some who are also counselors, are truly caregivers who exhibit a passion for their customers.

Overcoming Challenges

The largest challenge faced by Ben Franklin Transit, and indeed, statewide, is the limited number of vans available.

Economic conditions in 2008 have made it difficult for the state to appropriate enough funds to keep up

with demand. As a result, it will be able to meet only about one-third of the statewide demand for additional vans.

The stock of American-produced vans is also diminishing, which presents severe difficulties to vanpool operators in a time of significantly increasing demand. To cope with high gasoline prices and air quality problems, programs are also investigating vehicle options that are dually fueled by gas/electric or hydrogen-based fuel cells.

Rodrick recognizes that a successful vanpooling program needs a champion within the sponsoring agency. He is quick to point out that the vanpool program could never have attained the success it has without the help of Vanpool Fleet Coordinators Kitte Bassett, Vicky Pacheco, and Terry DeJuan. These three assistants are empowered to make decisions—such as terminating drivers or opening new vanpool groups—in an operation where safety is a huge concern. They also provide the mandatory training for all drivers.

One of Ben Franklin Transit's greatest assets is the relationship-building approach Rodrick and Frost bring to every aspect of the programs. For example, they have cultivated a supportive relationship with the unions and system management.

"It takes a lot of work at the ground level to create relationships in-house to make things happen on the street," says Rodrick

Frost echoes this emphasis on building partnerships, this time with regard to

Ben Franklin Transit's MegaVan holds up to 25 passengers.

relationships with the local human service agencies.

"As transit providers, we should try to look at the services we provide through the eyes of the agencies who need the transportation. Spending time with those agencies gives us the opportunity to understand how they are seeing things and what challenges their service populations face, and also gives us a forum to explain our own challenges," says Frost. "Human service agencies can be a transit operation's strongest ally. These partnerships can be best built when we see these agencies as fellow community members who have a mission to fulfill for the citizens of the community."

Relationships are equally important with customers. Rodrick recommends that even for programs that have grown as rapidly as Ben Franklin Transit's, that staff maintain a customer service attitude. Frost also encourages transit agencies to put the customer's needs first and have no bias as to the mode through which they deliver services.

"Our job is to give the customer options, whether that means safe walking or biking paths, carpools or vanpools, bus service or contract service," says Frost

Yet, the Ben Franklin Transit program does not hesitate to embrace change either. In fact, at a recent meeting of vanpooling operators, Rodrick was the first to encourage his colleagues to use new technologies to improve their operations.

