

WE'VE COME A LONG WAY, PLANNERS

Dulce Setterfield, former lead planner of the LPTBA



Centralia, Chehalis, and part of Lewis County comprise a Public Transportation Benefit Area (PTBA), the second PTBA created in Washington State, known as the LPTBA. Thirty years ago, on November 2, 1976, the majority of voters within the LPTBA said “Yes” to public transit. The lead planner for the LPTBA’s Twin Transit system was Dulce Setterfield (now this middle-aged writer). Hired in the summer of 1976, the Associate Planner position with the Lewis County Planning Department was her first job opportunity beyond an internship. Achieving the crucial ballot-box victory for a modest transit system in a notably conservative area was an exciting career starting point.

Some buildings and public facilities designed in that decade were demolished years ago. But Twin Transit has endured and expanded with modest enhancements, thus providing a tangible legacy in a profession that cannot guarantee that desired results will be realized commensurate with either brilliance of vision, collaborative capability, or effort invested—especially where political will withers or makes an abrupt U-turn.

The foundation for Twin Transit was a certain provision in the Revised Code of Washington, reflecting the wisdom of elected officials, who agreed in 1975 to authorize formation of PTBAs. The *Comprehensive Transit Plan of the Lewis Public Transportation Benefit Area* sprung not from a pre-existing transit authority, but from a local planning department. Planning Director Steve Tilley had the acumen to promptly apply for financial assistance that was available to foster the local planning process. That set the stage for his department to access technical assistance while striving to complete all required elements of a plan, established by both the State of Washington and the federal Urban Mass Transportation Administration.

In today’s world, transit planning departments, or community development as birthplace for something that hasn’t yet found a world. Planners can incubate respond to early signs of unlikely to unfold without a exploration and development of a winning project or program design, or some other manifestation of an envisioned community asset.



authorities abound. But planning divisions of departments, can still function new and precedent-setting, permanent home in the larger ideas, connect resources, and what is newly possible—but disciplined approach to

Also in today’s world, electronic communications among planners foster peer assistance with a wide spectrum of expertise. But keyboards and computer screens were unavailable when Twin Transit was born. The lead planner had occasional telephone contact with Paul Gamble of the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT). He nurtured many emerging PTBAs. Contact included neither voice messaging nor mobile devices nor even fax machines. Snail mail and hand delivery were options and Gamble made one visit to Lewis County.

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Gamble identified the latest literature on forecasting ridership, perhaps the thorniest part of the technical aspects of system planning (and revenue projection from the fare box) in the formative years of PTBAs. A first-year operating budget and five-year capital budget were developed without electronic spreadsheets. The dynamics between mayors of small, rival cities, who collaborated with a county commissioner to advise the project, were not much different than a planner might encounter today. Interested citizens also had input on an advisory board. Parties such as the public utility weighed in on concerns like the complexity and administrative cost of adding a transit-related line item for the household tax (to monthly bills sent to customers within the PTBA tax district). Local service organizations, such as Rotary, Elks, Lions, Jaycees, clamored to schedule the lead planner, newest face in town, as a guest speaker. And all nine of the organizations she visited upheld male-only membership requirements. We've come a long way.

But Twin Transit still has a way to go before it has much presence in cyberspace. (It seems to lack a stand-alone website; perhaps a local community college student would like to tackle that opportunity.) WSDOT's site has a page describing Twin Transit, along with numerous other PTBAs. It reveals that the household tax was replaced with a sales tax after nine years (another Yes vote, in 1985). Nineteen years later, a modest tax increase successfully passed (2004). In 1976, the household tax option was politically palatable, whereas the sales tax option was not. So a pragmatic decision was made with stakeholder concurrence, after grasping the need to accept incremental advances in that community. That proved to be as valuable a lesson as any insights gleaned from a discussion of theory and practice of planning in the classroom.

The name given to the system by a planner intent on cranking out a pre-election information leaflet has persisted for three decades. No expensive branding exercises or focus groups were deployed to inform the original public education and marketing strategy for Twin Transit.

After a local artist failed job of illustrating the new community prepare cartoon swiftly transformed the drawn panels with stick prepared map of fabulous, except every figure in the centerfold graphic was male.



to show up for the low-budget leaflet, a recent graduate from college was hastily recruited to illustrations. Artist Vince Ryland planner's storyboard (crudely figures and script), plus a carefully proposed routes. The result was

Did only men live in Lewis County? Did women have no stake in public affairs? Actually, most of the citizens on the advisory board were women. The planner made him add female characters. The eye-catching graphics proved to be a hit with citizen-activists and resonated with voters. Cartoons can spark the mind and cut to the chase with frugal use of words. Twin Transit's graphic depiction was emulated in subsequent years by other PTBAs.

A challenge issued to the Planning Department by the Chamber of Commerce to debate the ballot measure was withdrawn shortly before the election. Instead of facing a scary debate, the rookie planner was invited to speak on local radio with the Chehalis Mayor.

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A newspaper editorial opposing a household tax to support Twin Transit was anticipated, but a funny thing happened. The editor must have caught the pulse of the community. He dropped opposition while publishing plenty of letters praising the transit plan. It must not have hurt that the Planning Department contracted with the paper to produce a tabloid-style *Public Information Leaflet* to distribute to every residential postal customer within the LPTBA.

An intrepid watchdog of public accountability questioned government spending for a newsprint publication sprinkled with grinning, talking buses and cartoon panels. He piped down as soon as the legal and financial basis for the leaflet was explained (including the acknowledgement of state and federal project provisions, as noted on the first page of the leaflet).

And voters flocked to the polls in that presidential election year. Following the November 2nd victory, the lead planner got really busy, fleshing out every element of the plan, per WSDOT-funded project expectations. Now federal financial assistance would be available to buy buses.

Long before election day, were voiced by university young planner got a full-returning to campus (fall transportation planning planner living and working



completed master's degree, ought to journey to and from Seattle twice-weekly to attend a transportation planning class. Granted, traffic congestion was not as prevalent as today. But a fuel-saving 55-mph speed limit was in effect and the planner worked extra hours that autumn, with evening meetings and a speaking circuit. Roundtrip, a visit to the university required nearly 200 miles of travel, and she did not yet own a car.

unfathomable expectations faculty who learned the time job and was not quarter, 1976). A professor insisted that a in Chehalis, with a half-

In theory, with high-speed rail, perhaps such a roundtrip commute for an educational purpose could be believable, if the rail-plus-city bus (or taxi) schedule could perfectly dovetail with a specific class schedule. Business class with Amtrak lends itself to catching up with reading or perhaps sleeping. Or daydreaming about regional monorails, high speed, passenger-only ferries, or simply completion of a certain Seattle bicycle path that has been championed by tenacious citizens for decades.

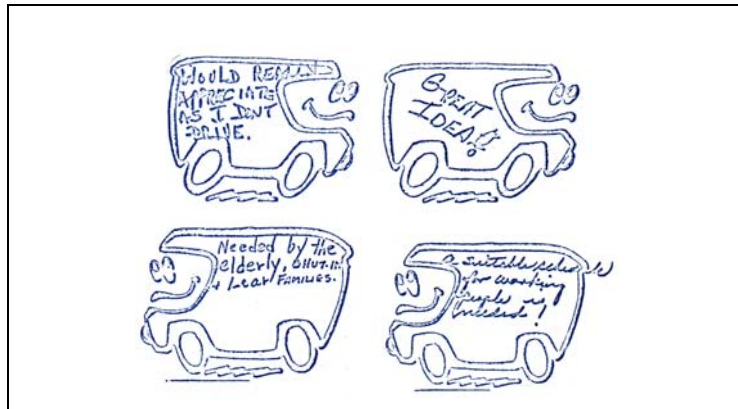
But the gap between ideal and real transportation options persists: 30 years after a quiet community agreed to become an early adopter and support transit (and long after a certain professor retired), high speed rail remains an exotic phenomena we explore overseas, where transportation planning is accomplished within a different paradigm. As for distance learning, online university courses were born decades after Twin Transit. No mention was made in Lewis County in the mid-1970s of a single seminar or forum sponsored by the Washington Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA), nor any other informal learning and peer-assistance. Indeed, APA was never mentioned and no *Planning* magazine, let alone a Chapter newsletter, reached desks in Chehalis.

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Planners were then located in an annex, not the main building. That continues to be the case, for better or worse, in some counties in the 21st century. Planners certainly enjoy a richer professional world today. We have abundant and easy connections with colleagues, plus exposure to thought leaders, emerging issues, and new techniques.

The Planning Department in Lewis County was eventually reborn as the Community Development Department and relocated to Market Boulevard in Chehalis. The LPTBA is autonomously administered. Thirty years ago, routes were designed by driving streets and sketching on maps, which allowed the young planner to escape from an office known for chain-smoking secretaries. Today, work environments are smoke-free and electronic tools are widely deployed in transit route design, revision, expansion, and daily operation.

The rookie planner chose not to remain long in Lewis County. Years later, she drove the freeway between Seattle and Portland countless times during 13 years working for the Bonneville Power Administration. In the 1990s, she made stops in Centralia and Chehalis to check up on the modest transit system she planned and championed, and was pleased to spot new amenities, such as a bus shelter. Without driving, the Internet now provides a way to catch a quick glimpse of the LPTBA's legacy and ongoing progress, accessible with only a few mouse-clicks.



Note: messages on drawings above are examples of public comments from a low-budget, interactive 'graffiti' display where dozens of citizens expressed their thoughts, prior to the election. All Twin Transit artwork by Vince Ryland.