



OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE OMNIBUS SOCIETY OF AMERICA, INC.

JULY/AUGUST 2010

Welcome to another issue of The Green Pennant Special, the official publication of The Omnibus Society of America.

Through this publication we hope to keep our readers informed of events happening in the transit industry in Chicago and other cities in the United States.

Visit the Omnibus Society of America website at "www.osabus.com". At osabus.com we will be posting upcoming fan trips and meetings information, as well as membership information.

Please visit our site when you have a chance and give us your opinions and comments.

• JULY/AUGUST MEETINGS

The July meeting of the Omnibus Society of America will be held on July 2, 2010, in the Anderson Pavilion of Swedish Covenant Hospital, 2751 W. Winona Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. The meeting will start at 7:30 pm.

Our program for the evening will be a slide presentation on Chicago trackless trolley buses by member John Le Beau.

The August meeting of the Omnibus Society of America will be held on August 6, 2010, in the Anderson Pavilion of Swedish Covenant Hospital. The meeting will start at 7:30 pm.

New Auxiliary Entrance on Archer Opens at Cermak-Chinatown Station

Elevator to be Added at Cermak Entrance

CTA President Richard L. Rodriguez and Chicago Transit Board Chairman Terry Peterson today announced the opening of a new entrance to the Red Line's Cermak-Chinatown station. Located approximately one block north of Cermak on Archer Avenue, the new entrance will serve as the primary access point for customers while the main entrance to the station on the north side of Cermak is reconstructed and made accessible. The south entrance on Cermak also will be closed to customers beginning Friday night at 11 p.m.

"Infrastructure improvements like this are very important to CTA but are dependent on capital funding," said CTA President Richard L. Rodriguez. "Thanks to the stimulus funds we are able to renovate this station, provide a new entry point and use our scarce capital funds for other much needed projects. When the work is complete at Cermak-Chinatown, customers will be able to enjoy a more modern and accessible station with the added convenience of

another entrance and exit."

Beginning Friday, June 4, both the north and south entrances on Cermak will be closed to customers so construction can begin. As a result, the westbound and eastbound #21 Cermak buses will undergo reroutes. The eastbound bus stop at Cermak/Wentworth will be eliminated. Eastbound #21 and #62 Archer buses now will stop in front of the new Archer entrance into the Cermak station.

Westbound buses will stop at Archer/Wentworth to allow customers to access the station at a signal controlled crosswalk rather than crossing in the middle of the road.

"Capital projects such as this require a significant amount of funding; however, they must be done if we are to have a reliable public transit system that serves all customers," said Chairman Peterson. "The availability of stimulus funds is a great opportunity to make improvements the agency otherwise couldn't afford."

In addition to the creation of the new auxiliary entrance on Archer, the station renovation project involves upgrading the main Cermak entrance by replacing the stairs and escalator, building a new station house at street level on Cermak and constructing a protective perimeter, including posts and planters around the outside of the station. The main Cermak entrance sustained major damage as the result of a traffic accident in April 2008.

An elevator will be installed at the Cermak entrance making the station accessible to customers with disabilities. When construction is complete by the end of 2010, 92 of 144 CTA rail stations (65%) will be accessible.

Ridership at the Cermak station on an average weekday is 3,530. CTA's Red Line is the busiest line in the rail system with 249,225 rides on an average weekday.

Total cost of the project is \$12.5 million and is funded with American Reinvestment Recovery Act – also known as stimulus – funding. CTA received a total \$241 million in stimulus funds. Projects funded through stimulus funds include the track renewal project in the Blue Line's Dearborn Subway and the purchase of 58 hybrid articulated buses.

Wight Hill, A Joint Venture was awarded the contract through a competitive bid.

Former Metra director Pagano's death formally ruled a suicide

**BY DAN ROZEK Staff Reporter
Chicago Sun Times**

Former Metra executive director Philip Pagano had alcohol in his system but wasn't drunk early on May 7 when he stepped in front of a Metra commuter train near Crystal Lake.

Pagano's death was formally ruled a suicide Friday by a McHenry County coroner's jury reviewing the circumstances that led to the beleaguered Metra veteran being struck by one of his own trains.

During the inquest, deputy coroner Kim Bostic disclosed that Pagano at the time of his death had a blood-alcohol level of .026 — well below the .08 legal limit at which a person is considered intoxicated.

No drugs or other substances were found in his system, "not even caffeine," Bostic said.

The 60-year-old Pagano killed himself near his northwest suburban home about two hours before a Metra board meeting that likely would have ended in his firing after 20 years as head of the commuter rail service.

A Metra investigation had found that Pagano took at least \$475,000 from Metra for unused vacation days, even when he used the days. He also had borrowed nearly \$840,000 from deferred compensation and insurance accounts — \$127,000 more than he had available.

Pagano admitted to a Metra investigator that he twice forged Metra chairwoman Carole Doris' signature to get part of the vacation money.

A McHenry County sheriff's detective testified the Metra probe apparently triggered Pagano's suicide.

"Everything seems to indicate he was distraught over this investigation," Detective Ed Maldonado said.

Just before he was killed, Pagano spoke to his long-time friend and former state Republican chairman Al Jourdan, telling him he was "taking the last train out," Maldonado testified.

Near the end of that 7:45 a.m. call, Jourdan told police he heard a train through the phone — which abruptly disconnected, Maldonado said. The phone

— which was found with Pagano — was destroyed by the collision, Maldonado said.

Pagano had left a note in his wallet directing authorities after his death to contact his wife, Barbara, who was out of town, and also a Metra official, Bostic said. The note contained phone numbers for both, she said.

Authorities earlier have said that Pagano, in a suicide note to the Metra board, expressed concern about his family and hoped all he had earned "is not thrown away." He wrote that he was not taking the easy way out but wanted to "end all this madness for all concerned."

Pagano also wrote that he was "deeply sorry" for all he put the board through. He wrote: "I love Metra"

Pagano also left behind notes, which have not been made public, for his wife and two adult daughters.

Fate of trolleybuses hangs in balance

King County Metro Transit's fleet of 159 trolleybuses needs to be replaced soon, but what they should be replaced with is up for debate.

By Mike Lindblom

Seattle Times transportation reporter

About one-fifth of all King County Metro Transit rides are made on an electric bus, powered by a nonpolluting trolley wire overhead.

But the agency hasn't purchased a new trolleybus since 1979.

Since then, Metro bought new bus bodies and fastened old electric motors onto them. They pulled out the diesel engines from a fleet of dual-mode buses, so they ran only on their electric motors. These minor miracles saved the public tens of millions of dollars.

Now the day of reckoning has arrived.

By 2014, the agency expects its fleet of 159 trolleybuses to wear out.

At the Sodo maintenance base, trolleybus-maintenance manager Mike Eeds pointed to a crack in a steel roof member, near the rear door of

a bus. It's not a safety hazard but could cause leaks — and cracks are expected to spread through the fleet. Worn-out teeth were being replaced on the same bus's drive axle. Metro has been cannibalizing spare parts, but those will run out by 2016, he said.

County elected officials must decide by next year whether to retire the old trolleybuses, buy new-generation models or switch to some other technology.

An audit last year suggested tearing out the overhead wires and switching to hybrid buses, whose diesel engines are supplemented with onboard batteries. Doing so could ostensibly save \$8 million a year compared to trolleybuses, by reducing electrical-maintenance costs and making route schedules more flexible, the audit says.

But many residents along the routes, and Seattle transportation director Peter Hahn, insist on preserving electric buses because they are quiet and nonpolluting. Seattle ranks third of only six cities in the U.S. and Canada that operate trolleybuses, behind San Francisco and Vancouver, B.C. Edmonton removed its trolleybus wires last year, but Laval, Quebec, is considering a brand-new system using local hydropower.

More than pollution

The debate here involves issues far beyond pollution and noise, with a major consideration being torque — electric motors have superior power to turn bus axles coming off a dead stop.

"San Francisco and Seattle have hills that are alike, up and down. There's no way you can put diesel buses on the hills," says Nathanael Chappelle, Metro's 2007 co-operator of the year. Eeds agrees, saying a "straight hybrid" wouldn't work.

Midway up Queen Anne Hill, a former cable-car route, the Number 2 and Number 13 buses stop for passengers on a 15 percent slope. When the wheels turn again, the acceleration pushes people firmly into their seat backs. The best drivers wait for all to find a seat, or feather the accelerator pedal, so as not to topple unstable riders in the aisle. Larry Nelson, living in a fourth-floor hillside apartment, says sparks fly off the wire or the tires spin on damp pavement. Still, that's better than smelling diesel, he says.

In the overhead network, there are dead spots where electricity is interrupted, so a bus must build momentum to coast through, but not faster than 10 mph.

Take a curve too fast, and the power poles fall off the charged wires — trolleybus driver Chai Kunjara compares the physics to a waterskiier who swings wide faster than the powerboat.

Despite the quirks, he says, the steering handles smoothly, the dashboard console is simple and one can navigate by following the wires, though sometimes drivers forget and stray off them.

The downside of trolleybuses is inflexibility. In the ice storm of December 2008, several trolleybuses on First Hill became stuck, paralyzing the central-city service as the following buses couldn't pass. Diesel buses can go around stalls — Metro says it will "dieselize" its electric Number 70 route for three years because of the upcoming Mercer Street reconstruction.

Trolleybuses cost \$1 million or more, compared with \$720,000 for diesel-hybrids. Auditors also point out there's only one North American trolleybus maker, exacerbating the risk of higher costs.

On the other hand, Vancouver is happy with its 2007 models by Winnipeg-based New Flyer, and expects them to last more than 20 years each. Dayton, Ohio, imported Czech buses for final assembly in the U.S. Hahn argues there's no danger a robust international trolleybus industry will go extinct.

Exploring options

The County Council has ordered a technical study. Councilman Larry Phillips, D-Magnolia, argues electric buses support the fight against sprawl, by making busy city neighborhoods more pleasant.

The timing is awkward. Hydrogen vehicles or plug-in electric buses seem promising, but Metro can't wait until those technologies mature. That leaves other options:

- Order a trolleybus with supplementary batteries charged through overhead power and regenerative braking — so the bus can sometimes detour off-wire.
- Combine overhead power with a supplementary diesel motor, for long or short stretches off-wire.
- Travel wire-free using electric batteries and high-torque motors, to be recharged by a diesel motor running at a steady, fuel-efficient rate. Metro General Manager Kevin Desmond also hopes to research whether there's a bus available to use overhead power in-city, and then continue off-wire several miles farther out.

Just last year, Metro published a paper describing a better "Rapid Trolley Network" that provided trips as frequent as every six minutes. There could be off-board payment and roomier vehicles, like a train. New wires over Denny Way, Yesler Way and East Madison Street would fill gaps in trolleybus routes.

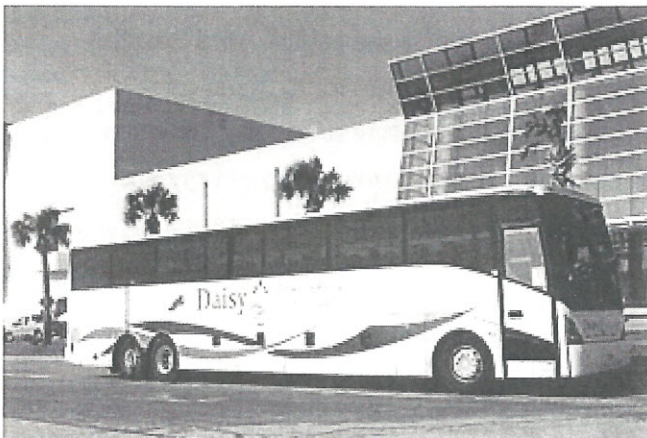
When the county took over Seattle bus lines in 1973, the deal guaranteed "electric trolley service" shall continue, transportation Director Hahn's letter emphasizes. The city is writing a new transit plan that likely would keep or even expand the lines, he said in an interview.

"We believe, in terms of climate change, greenhouse-gas goals, this is the most reliable technology."

*Mike Lindblom: 206-515-5631 or
mlindblom@seattletimes.com*

Daisy Tours and Shuttles Expands to Corpus Christi, TX

Faribault, MN... Daisy Tours and Shuttles, headquartered in San Antonio Texas, is bringing their unique blend of quality transportation and community service to Corpus Christi.



Daisy Vice President, Daniel Bratcher, pointed out that in addition to offering the Coastal Bend region additional charter service, Daisy's special expertise in providing convention services should help the region attract more and larger conventions. "This benefits the whole city, and helps local businesses like restaurants, merchants and attractions. An important part of our corporate philosophy is contributing to the communities we serve."

June Bratcher, Daisy's Founder, CEO and "Company Mom," is somewhat of a legend in the San Antonio region for the energy she brings to both business and raising money for charities such as the "Go Red For Women" campaign that raises

awareness of cardiovascular risk.
(www.goredforwomen.org)

Daisy currently stations four coaches at their new Corpus facility and has plans to add at least two more to handle growing demand. The company will spearhead transportation for the Tall Ships five day festival that begins July 1.

Voted Best Motorcoach Company in San Antonio by the hospitality industry, Daisy has hosted the Final Four basketball tournament, as well as offering tours, convention services and charters. They hold the Department of Defense's highest rating, and have transported Heads of State, as well as handling five military contracts for more than 20 years.

In addition to expanding into the Corpus Christi area, Daisy has just placed an order for two Van Hool C2045s, increasing their fleet to 25 Van Hool's. The coaches are equipped with Van Hool's exclusive contoured parcel rack, with six 22" video monitors, Van Hool Body Line seats with 3 point seat belts, Smartwave tire monitoring system, passenger shades and rear windows. They are powered by Detroit Diesel Series 60 engines coupled to Allison B500 Gen IV automatic transmissions.

Greg Gates, ABC Senior Account Executive said, "For more than a decade we have enjoyed Daisy Charters and Shuttles as a loyal customer and friend. ABC is proud to serve them. The fact that both ABC and Daisy Tours are family owned and operated makes a perfect formula for success. In recent years, June's sons, David and Daniel, have become heavily involved in managing the company, adding a second generation's energy and vision."

"When I'm having a bad day, I find an excuse to call June. She's like the Energizer Bunny - lots of energy, and when I get off the phone with her... the worlds better, and I can't stop smiling," continued Gates. For her part, Ms Bratcher said, "I can't say enough about Greg Gates, and ABC. They've always been there when I needed them - right from the beginning."

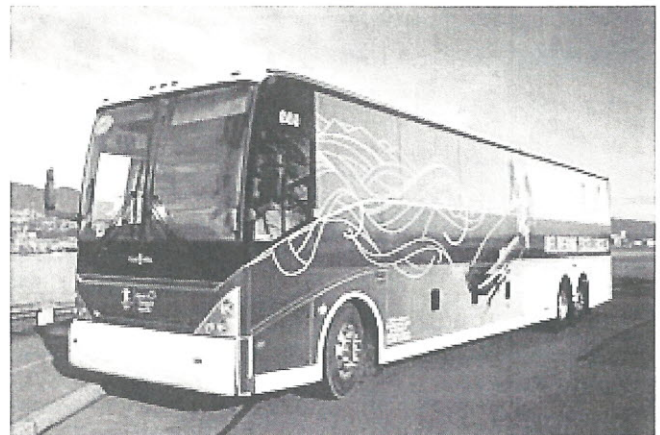
Traxx adds 3 new Van Hool C2045E's to their fleet

Traxx Coachlines has recently added three new Van Hool C2045E's to their fleet. Started in 1932 as Redcliff Bus Lines, operating taxis between Redcliff and Medicine Hat AB, Traxx has evolved into one

of Western Canada's largest, and most respected transportation companies.

This brings their fleet of motorcoaches to 48. The new coaches are powered by Detroit Diesel Series 60's coupled to Allison Gen4 B500 Six-Speed Automatic Transmission, and are equipped with a luxury 6 monitor REI entertainment system, WiFi, 110 volt outlets and Alcoa DuraBright Aluminum Wheels. The 57 Amaya Torino seats treat passengers to leather inserts and footrests.

Working out of Calgary, Vancouver, Regina and Medicine Hat they offer a diverse variety of bus services ranging from luxury tours to school buses. They provide three distinct classes of motorcoach travel (Luxury, Express and Industrial) as well as providing school transportation for a number of cities and towns. In addition, their facilities offer services to coaches passing through ranging from wash and lavatory service to emergency road repairs, regular maintenance and inspections.



"Traxx was ABC's first Van Hool customer in Canada, and they now have 17 Van Hool coaches as well as four of the 3035RE's. Traxx has grown exponentially, to the point where they were the lead Canadian transportation company for the Vancouver Winter Olympics," pointed out ABC Vice President and Canadian Sales Manager John McFarlane. "That growth has been based on superior service and great management with a disciplined commitment to quality. All of us at ABC are proud to contribute to their success."

Traxx Chief Operating Officer, Nigel Taylor said, "John has been a lot more than a sales person to us. He's become a trusted friend and a valued advisor. Whenever we need answers, or help, he's always there. It's hard to separate the equipment from the support, and the combination of ABC, Van

Hool and John McFarlane is hard to beat. ABC's Warranty and Tech support is the best out there."

The road to healing: Shriners Care puts new MCI cruiser to work for kids

SCHAUMBURG, IL — May 17, 2010 — As part of its mission to assist children in need of medical care regardless of financial need, the Shriners of British Columbia and Yukon have taken delivery of a new MCI® J4500 that will be used to transport children receiving treatment at the Shriners Hospital for Children. The new coach, which features a wheelchair lift as well as a video entertainment system and 110-volt outlets for laptops and medical devices, is the fifth coach in the Shriners Care Cruiser fleet. All are MCIs.



The BC Shriners organization bought its first MCI in 2001, and the J4500 is its first new-coach purchase. "It drives like a Rolls Royce," said Jim Harrison, executive director of the Shriners Program. Western Bus Parts, Vancouver, does the retrofits that make the cruisers fit for medical transport. All feature medical chairs that can fully recline as well as assist a patient to a standing position; wide, accessible lavatories; galleys; docking space for stretchers; hospital beds or couches; additional HVAC equipment to make sure the coach can maintain a constant 72-degree interior; and a carpeted floor with a heavy underlay, says Harrison.

Outfitted with a Detroit Diesel Series 60 engine and an Allison transmission, the newest Shriners Care Cruiser will operate much like the other coaches in the fleet. The Shriners Care Cruisers provide no-cost transportation for children with burns, orthopedic and spinal cord injuries to Shriners Hospitals in Portland and Spokane as well as children to and from Sunny Hill and BC Children's

Hospital. The cruisers also transport pregnant women to the hospital.

Each coach travels anywhere from 300 to 550 miles a day, six days a week and the fleet moves about 3,500 passengers a year. Since the program started in 2001, Harrison estimates more than 23,000 patients and family members have ridden aboard the Care Cruisers. Harrison says the coaches are ultimately far more efficient and safer than vans.

The MCI J4500 is the best-selling intercity coach in the U.S. and Canada, a distinction it has enjoyed for six years running. These coaches also feature clean-diesel technology that limits particulate matter as well as wide-ride suspension and electronic stability control as standard features.

The City of Valparaiso, Indiana, updates its existing ChicagoDASH system fleet with four new, all-digital MCI® Commuter Coaches

SCHAUMBURG, IL — April 15, 2010 — Proving that long-range regional transit by coach is paying dividends, the City of Valparaiso has taken delivery of four new, fully appointed MCI Commuter Coaches to support its daily ChicagoDASH service from Valparaiso, Indiana, to Chicago's Loop.



ChicagoDASH has doubled its monthly ridership since its October 2008 launch, according to Tyler Kent, transit manager and assistant city planner for the City of Valparaiso. "The economics and convenience make it an attractive city service," explains Kent. "We're getting people out of their cars."

The ChicagoDASH service is a morning and evening rush hour route that has coaches leaving

Valparaiso between 6-7:30 a.m. and returning from three Chicago Loop pickup points to a last stop in Valparaiso at 7:15 p.m. each weekday. A daily round-trip ticket costs \$15. Commuters are using the system to commute to work and school, Kent said, adding that four riders regularly bring their bikes aboard so they can get around in Chicago.

With the average one-way travel time at one hour and 15 minutes, the MCI Commuter Coaches deliver ChicagoDASH customers a comfortable ride with a rolling workspace. Each of the four 53-seat coaches is appointed with a Wi-Fi system for Internet connectivity and 110-volt outlets to support computers and chargers. Each coach also features an LCD satellite television monitor system, a wheelchair lift and bike rack for commuters who cycle to their ultimate destination.

ChicagoDASH is a partnership of the City of Valparaiso, the Valparaiso Development Commission, Northwestern Indiana Regional Development Authority, the U.S. Federal Transit Administration and the Northwest Indiana Regional Bus Authority. The four-coach MCI order replaces three older leased coaches that provided the service up until now, Kent said. "It's more economical for us to own our own coaches," he said, adding they will be operated by the Indianapolis-based Free Enterprise System.

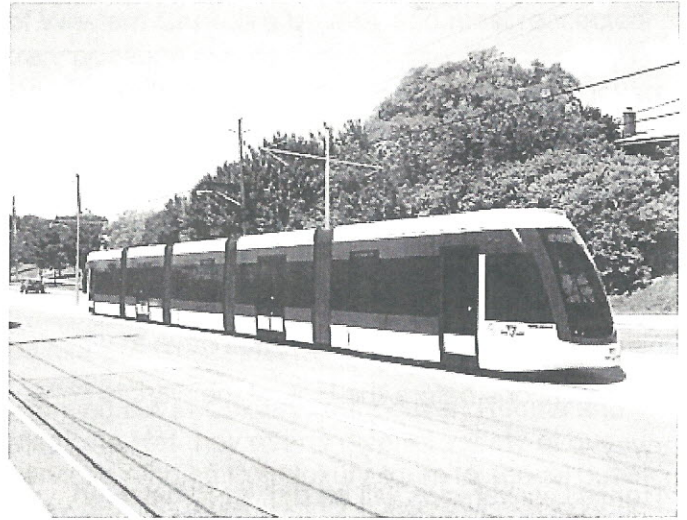
The ChicagoDASH system may also be expanding into one other community near Valparaiso, Kent said. "We're hoping to make one more stop on our way into Chicago," Kent said. "There's interest regionally in Northwest Indiana in this system."

For more information, go to www.ChicagoDASH.com.

Metroplex buys 182 streetcars for Transit City

Models similar to those used in half a dozen European cities will ply Toronto's new lines

Tess Kalinowski Transportation Reporter



In a move that underscores its commitment to Toronto's Transit City streetcar lines, Metrolinx has agreed to buy 182 European-style streetcars from Bombardier for \$770 million to run on Sheppard, Eglinton, Finch and the Scarborough Rapid Transit system.

The agreement, along with the provincial approval of a more slowly phased-in Transit City plan, exercises an option on a contract the TTC signed last year with Bombardier to buy 204 light rail vehicles for its existing 11 routes for \$1.22 billion. "If we weren't planning to build all four projects we sure wouldn't be ordering 182 cars," Metrolinx CEO Rob Prichard said Monday, following an announcement at the Kennedy station.

Prichard downplayed Toronto Mayor David Miller's absence from the Monday announcement, saying the timing was driven by Bombardier: an earlier announcement in Thunder Bay was repeated in Toronto.

A spokesman for the mayor said Miller was given short notice of the event and had to chair the executive committee meeting Monday.

The mayor has refused to support the Metrolinx's revised plan for building four Transit City lines ever since the province cut \$4 billion out of its promised funding for the first five years. Miller says that the province can't guarantee the lines will be built because the Liberal government would have to win two more elections before the bulk of the work is underway.

The Transit City vehicles will be delivered between 2013 and 2020, according to a detailed construction schedule. The contract includes a six-year option to buy up to 118 more.

But Prichard said the order is lower than expected because Transit City is being phased in more slowly. In addition to the \$4 billion deferred in the March provincial budget, construction of about 23 kilometers of the four lines has been pushed to a second phase of construction, which remains unfunded so far.

Metrolinx is supposed to release an investment strategy by 2013 that would offer suggestions for taxation tools or other revenue sources to pay for those portions.

Meantime, the Transit City vehicles are an excellent value because they don't require the customizing replacement streetcars do, Prichard said.

Based on Bombardier's Flexity model, they will have doors that open on both sides and a cab on each end so that won't need a loop to turn. The air-conditioned vehicles, similar to vehicles already running in Geneva, Zurich, Berlin, Brussels and Marseille, will accommodate about twice as many passengers as the old models.

The Transit City lines and the vehicles on them, being paid for by the province (with some help from the federal government on the Sheppard line) will be owned by the province but built and operated by the TTC.

The TTC's contract for replacement cars includes two-thirds funding from the city and one-third from the province. They are expected to be running on Toronto streets in 2013.

What's new about the Transit City streetcars?

Transit City light rail vehicles will differ in some significant ways from the cars the TTC has purchased to replace the fleet running on 11 existing routes.

Differences:

sides (four on each side rather than three), and a cab at each end so the car can be driven in two directions without being turned on a loop.

- Longer: 28 metres, rather than 24, with five articulated modules rather than three; they can be coupled together to create trains of up to three vehicles.
- Gauge: Will run on internationally standardized track rather than the slightly wider gauge used on Toronto's "legacy" routes. Won't have to comply with the TTC's unique downtown turning radius requirements or navigate steep hills.

Similarities:

- 100 per cent low-floor for accessibility.
- Air-conditioned.
- Bike racks.
- Meet the 25 per cent Canadian content regulation set out by the province. Bombardier has said it

expects to exceed that but can't yet say by how much, according to Metrolinx.

Renewed commuter rail push on fresh track

BY RICH JAMES

The drive to expand commuter rail across Northwest Indiana seems to have died sometime over the last year, yet there was virtually no recognition of the loss.

There was no wake. No funeral. No obituary.

While some knew the movement was ailing, few apparently knew the seriousness of the situation.

And no one seemed willing to accept responsibility.

Now, five years after the Regional Development Authority was created to, in part, jump-start commuter rail expansion, the proponents are quietly trying to bring the cause back to life.

Rather than continuing to embrace the full build-out of rail lines to Lowell and Valparaiso -- as was the case in the past -- the initial focus will be on the West Lake Corridor -- and doing that in phases.

"If we are to help NWI get into the balance of the 21st century, part of our responsibility is to make it an enticing environment for people to build facilities to replace jobs lost in the steel industry," said Valparaiso's Harley Snyder, chairman of the RDA working group for commuter rail.

"Maybe we phase in and don't do this as one major project at one time," Snyder said. "It would give us greater flexibility in the need to finance a project of this size."

RDA executive director Bill Hanna, U.S. Rep. Peter Visclosky, D-Merrillville, and Gerald Hanas, president of the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District that owns the South Shore, met quietly last month to discuss the new approach.

The result of the meeting is that NICTD is charged with coming up with a segmented construction plan, with cost estimates and economic benefits. A transportation consultant already has been engaged.

Hanna, who has been with the RDA for just a year, acknowledged he inherited trouble. Hanna said

earlier pushes for a local funding source to match the \$500 million that Visclosky can secure have been poorly done.

Among those shortcomings has been a failure to come up with solid figures on jobs and economic growth. Hanna also cited "problematic" legislative efforts, including an ill-advised 2009 referendum.

"We have had economic hardship, but there are federal funds out there. We should leave no stone unturned to benefit the citizens," Hanna said.

State Reps. Chester Dobis, D-Merrillville, and Ed Soliday, R-Valparaiso, have shepherded the expanded commuter rail effort in the General Assembly in recent years. Without their support, there is little hope.

Neither has been pleased with the cooperation back home. Each said it will take some doing before they again take up the cause.

"There are some people up here who I distrust -- people who helped sabotage this effort," Dobis said. "I have been lied to."

Soliday added, "We have said we are not going to do anything until the NICTD board takes charge. Last time, we had no idea what it was going to cost. Many of us got caught flat-footed. We assumed that NICTD had endorsed it, but they had never voted on it."

The campaign for expanded rail two years ago was full of glitz but short on substance.

The RDA gave the NWI Forum Inc. \$130,000 for the public relations campaign to build public support for the Legislature to approve a local funding source. Glossy fliers flooded area mailboxes promising the creation of 26,480 jobs by 2040.

The campaign enraged those opposed to commuter rail because there was no explanation as to what type of jobs would be created, where they would be located and what they would pay.

Since that public relations campaign died, Visclosky said, tax problems and a recession have complicated the situation -- leading to the need for a new approach.

"What are the increments of the phases and the costs," Visclosky thought aloud. "We need to look at it from a local and federal perspective as to what is doable."

Hanna added, "We need an implementation process that makes sense for the people here. What would work in terms of ridership and finance? How do you break that down in terms of a pragmatic approach?"

While Hanas supports the new approach, he added, "The current financial picture in the industry is very dire. The lagging impact of the recession is a perfect storm of financial distress.

"It is going to take several years to get organized and get this off the ground. And, if in fact this has become financially intimidating, what would happen if we cut that in half?"

Hanas said the South Shore experience has him convinced people want more commuter rail.

Yet, Hanas warned, "One of the things that has to happen here is the electorate and whether they actively want this. It is not going to show up like a Christmas present."

While some contend more commuter rail isn't needed and simply will become a long-term financial burden, others don't see it that way.

"We have to move people and goods in more efficient ways," Soliday said. "A lot of the pollution we create is because we are sitting. Let us try and manage (with commuter rail) the traffic that is going to come through here."

Although no commuter rail is self-sustaining, Soliday said the return on investment is huge. For example, the state puts about \$15 million into the South Shore each year.

"Some \$265 million is brought back from Chicago and the people spend it here," he said.

Visclosky sees commuter rail expansion as the cornerstone of NWI's economic future. And because part of the federal tax on gasoline we put in cars goes to commuter rail, the area would be missing out if it didn't take advantage of what he can secure, Visclosky said.

And the leaders of the two largest planning organizations in NWI are calling the addition of two new commuter rail lines vital for the growth of the region.

Funding always an issue

Despite such lofty backing, nothing has created more controversy since the inception of the RDA than the push for two new commuter rail lines.

The issue has been the prime factor in Porter County's push to drop out of the RDA.

And while no one is talking about pulling out of the RDA in Lake County, the community as a whole doesn't seem to have embraced more commuter rail. Talk of a commuter rail line from Lowell to Chicago has been in the works for at least three decades.

The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission officially embraced new commuter rail in 1989. At the same time, rail service from Valparaiso to Chicago was ending because of internal fighting between Amtrak and Conrail.

Yet, the same problem plagues commuter rail today as it did two decades ago -- a local funding source.

In 1990, a three-county coalition known as Operation Bootstrap proposed a 1 percent sales tax for Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties as a funding source for rail. It never was embraced by the Legislature.

Visclosky has been sitting on a \$500 million appropriation for commuter rail for two years, waiting on a local funding source. It hasn't come.

But he doesn't see local funding as a tax, but rather an investment.

"We are recovering on the taxes we pay today," Visclosky said. "Where else do you put in \$1 and make 100 percent on your money? It is our investment."

The General Assembly earlier this year somewhat mysteriously approved a bill to create a Regional Transportation Authority to work under the RDA umbrella. The RTA would have authority to impose a .25 percent income tax across Lake, Porter, LaPorte and St. Joseph counties.

But voters in two of those counties would have had to approve a referendum for creation of the transportation authority. Porter and St. Joseph counties voted it down. Lake and LaPorte declined to take part.

Many thought the referendum was ill-advised.

"I wasn't happy about the referendum," said John Swanson, NIRPC's executive director. "(The vote)

was a reaction to a bad economy, not so much commuter rail. I believe there will be a funding source."

Mark Maassel, acting president of the Northwest Indiana Forum, said it is not the best of times to raise money.

"But if we don't look to the future, we will find ourselves locked," Maassel said. "Sixty or 70 years ago, I bet there were a lot of concerns about building the Borman.

"Commuter rail is a commitment to the next 100 years of having greater quality of life. Did we get blinded by events of today that we didn't look to the future?"

Swanson, too, said the region needs more commuter rail.

"I am convinced you have to have a viable commuter rail system to get to jobs in Chicago," Swanson said.

Visclosky believes that commuter rail enhances property values, pointing out Chicago has 500 miles of commuter rail lines.

"Commuter rail will bring new business here," visclosky said. "We don't want our kids to have to leave."

And in terms of future jobs, Visclosky added, "I do fight for steel every day, but there are no new jobs there."

Will it ever happen?

Porter County Commissioner Robert Harper is unbending in his opposition to the RDA and commuter rail in particular.

"How much is this railroad going to cost?" Harper said. "I asked a few questions and did a lot of research. It didn't matter how much money we had, the trains were not coming to Valparaiso because of the travel time (1 hour and 24 minutes to Chicago)."

Harper said his biggest concern is paying for commuter rail through the Regional Transportation Authority.

"The RTA would be tax after tax because the proposed tax (0.25 percent income tax) wouldn't raise enough money."

Soliday said infrastructure is needed if the region is to grow.

"You plan infrastructure 10 to 20 years before you need it," Soliday said. "If we are going to make the transformation Indianapolis made, we need infrastructure and to make sacrifices."

Hanna also feels there is a misconception that train stops would fuel sprawl.

"In terms of sprawl, cities are in charge of their own destiny," Hanna said. "Trains provide easy access to the economy and property values will be higher. We have an opportunity to control sprawl before it happens."

Yet, even some of those who support expanded commuter rail don't think it is going to happen.

Lake County Surveyor George Van Til has served on various levels of local government for almost four decades.

While he is a leading proponent of expanded commuter rail, he doesn't see it happening anytime soon. Van Til said the region should have laid the groundwork 30 to 40 years ago.

"Commuter rail to Lowell and Valparaiso? I'm doubtful. It goes back to what people's habits are. We point to Chicago and say that could be us," Van Til said. "To do societal changes is very difficult. Our habits are so locked into place.

"The South Shore is accepted. It is part of our life. But people in the south don't want to be connected to the north."

Former Porter Township Trustee Robert Wichlinski has long been a student of local government.

"It won't happen in our lifetime," Wichlinski said about commuter rail expansion. "We have a responsibility to make sacrifices for our posterity, yet we are about immediate gratification."

Norfolk light-rail official: Water may not be culprit

By Debbie Messina
The Virginian-Pilot
© May 27, 2010

NORFOLK

Water may not be to blame for the settling of light-rail tracks at the intersection of Brambleton Avenue and Second Street.

Don Lint, Hampton Roads Transit light-rail construction manager, said that once the tracks and the panels they are bolted to are removed next week, the agency will have a better idea of what went wrong.

On Tuesday, HRT officials said they thought flooding was the culprit. The area across from the Hague floods in unusually high tides.

Water "can play a role, but we're not sure it played a role in this," Lint said Wednesday.

He added that settling at the crossing has caused some movement of the tracks, which can be a cause of derailments.

Meanwhile, HRT President and CEO Philip Shucet said 10 other light-rail crossings built in the same way will be inspected for similar settling problems.

He said the project's \$338 million budget includes ample contingency money to pay for the repairs. The track crossing, now on a ballasted base, will be replaced with tracks that are embedded, providing a more solid foundation at the intersection. It will cost \$80,000 to \$120,000.

Shucet also said the problem will not cause HRT to miss its July 17 deadline for finishing track construction downtown. In fact, he said, the work is still ahead of schedule.

The repair is expected to take two weeks. Brambleton traffic will not be affected, but Second Street will be closed.

"We're doing what we're supposed to do," Shucet said.

He said high water could be a problem for light-rail operations at times because the system was built at grade level, which is less expensive than an elevated system.

"There might be times in some areas trains cannot pass," he said. "A decision was made to build it at grade.... There will be certain things we'll have to deal with."

The light-rail trains are expected to start running in May 2011.

*Debbie Messina, (757) 446-2588,
debbie.messina@pilotonline.com*

**OMNIBUS SOCIETY OF AMERICA
PO BOX A3051
CHICAGO IL 60690-3051**