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Valley Transit Community Leaders – Personal Interviews March/April 2013

PERSONAL INTERVIEW GOALS

The participant list for this group was generated from the community leader list used for the focus groups, but added to since scheduling personal interviews is much more accommodating (limited focus group dates). The target population for these interviews comprised of community and business executives who impact community initiatives through their support (financial support and political influence).

The personal interviews worked to garner similar information as the focus groups and the personal approach provided a platform to explore perceptions and knowledge base even further.

The areas below were covered through the interview questions:

1. Community Perceptions
2. Economic Impact
3. Operational Understanding of Public Transportation
4. Future of Public Transportation
5. Demographic Data

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Willems Marketing conducted 12 personal interviews with community leaders in the business, education and economic development sectors. Interviews averaged 30 minutes each. The age range spanned 35 – 65 years old, equal mix of Bachelor's and Master's degrees, 7 males and 5 females.

The participants were asked to share their perceptions, attitudes and inclinations surrounding public transportation, specifically Valley Transit. The results of those discussions were recorded by Willems Marketing and then used to create the summary report.

SUMMARY

Community perceptions based on popular response:

Overall, this group of research participants guessed a much lower number of rides than those in the focus groups (which consisted of many social service agencies and educational institutions).

When participants thought about people waiting for the bus, they generally didn't have any specific thoughts or assumed people were heading to work (or employment related travel). This group also didn't have strong thoughts about people who don't own a car – more comments revolved around 'I've never thought about that before' or assumed that since the Fox Cities geography is so spread out and most people need a car, that if they don't own one they must be in dire straits since it's fairly easy for all economic classes to purchase a car. Nobody in this group thought of environmental or 'green' reasons that people would ride the bus or not own a vehicle. Comments were made that riding the bus could decrease congestion, but were then followed up with the perception that congestion in the Fox Cities isn't as bad as in metro areas, so people are not forced to consider alternative forms of transportation.

Economic impact popular response:

The employee/employer benefits were clearly recognized with this group. Not only does public transportation provide the ability to hold a job, it elevates people's pride and increases the entire community's quality of life. Public transportation also expands the employee pool for areas businesses... especially for those who have positions that require lower skill level.

When asked to define the value and impact of Valley Transit in our community, there were many generic thoughts about how it helps people be more self-sustaining, how it helps employers, how it impacts shopping and medical care, but some interesting thoughts were shared relative to the overall economic condition of our Fox Cities. Some feel that due to our geographic 'spread', our public transportation is not adequate due to inconvenient schedules of routes, no shift-work routes, but fully understand that everything required to increase ridership and necessary to become more accommodating will contradict the cost structure. There were strong feelings about urging Valley Transit to focus services on industrial areas of Fox Cities. This line of thinking was apparent with many participants as they talked about this area 'being behind' in the area of public transportation due to state hindrances, as well as the way our community is laid out does not have vertical industry close to vertical housing... the expansive nature of how the Fox Cities has evolved does not make timely regional transportation easy to deliver.

In general, the participants feel that public transportation is important to the growth of our community, but there may be ways to improve service for work-related needs...but did not identify many specific options.

Operational understanding of Valley Transit - popular response:

Most participants answers revolved around government monies (in some fashion: state, federal, local tax) combined with rider fares. Once they learned the intricate partnership required to fund Valley Transit and were asked how VT could operate more efficiently, the responses were really mixed. A few thought of using smaller more fuel efficient buses (which VT already does), one thought of contracting with businesses for employee rides, but quite a few responded that they could think of nothing or assumed that VT is already doing all it can to be good stewards of the dollars they receive. Only one person suggested exploring an RTA.

Interesting Note: Many respondents talked about not being transportation experts, so felt hard-pressed to make any recommendations. It was clear that public transportation does not top their list of concerns and they knew very little about it other than it 'must be good for the community'. One commented that this topic is never talked about either good or bad, so it must be running just fine.

Future of public transportation:

The topic of tax increase to either support Valley Transit in the current funding model, or an RTA, resulted in support (by all but one person, who thought there must be other ways of funding... whoever benefits from service, should pay for it, which would be primarily businesses). However, there were mixed feelings on whether it should be done through sales or property taxes, but all felt that public transportation was worthy of a tax increase consideration in some form.

Of the 12 participants, 7 were familiar with the RTA concept and 5 did not know what it was, but all were in favor of exploring it as an option. The support for the concept again was focused on how it could increase the employee/employer connections. One person feels the Fox Cities does not have the congestion to warrant an RTA. Two people thought it would be beneficial to have the RTA operate from Oshkosh to Green Bay due to the large number of commuters who live in one community, but work in a neighboring community. On the flip side, another person was adamant about the RTA only being successful if it was primarily a Fox Cities effort.

When asked specifically about supporting a cap on property taxes to support transit funding, there was mixed reactions: some would just like more information, some were very against doing anything to raise property taxes, while others were in favor of raising property taxes (with the rationale that the larger burden should be put on the higher income residents, increasing property taxes for the lower income wouldn't be beneficial).

Demographic Information – popular responses:

Only one respondent relied on public transportation here in the Fox Cities (when they were growing up). The remainder of the participants have utilized public transportation while traveling in big cities or in other countries as tourists and when in college.

Strengths, weaknesses and other comments regarding Valley Transit:

Upkeep, maintenance and cleanliness of buses, schedule timeliness and safety/good drivers were listed amongst the strengths of the system. A few people commented that they don't ever hear anything about the transit system, so that must be a good thing.

In contrast to that, some people listed 'not hearing anything about the system' as an opportunity for improvement from the standpoint of community education and making sure people know how to access the system. They feel that VT needs to declare the need for people to ride the bus – make the message strong so people stop, listen and change their habits. Several suggested a 'Ride the Bus Today' type of campaign. People feel that an initiative that positions the bus as 'cool' to ride, that it's not only for people who don't have a car or are "down on their luck", would be effective with students, people who are concerned about their environmental footprint or people who are just wanting to save money (by riding bus vs. driving their car).

KEY FINDINGS

- There was much concern from many respondents about seeing 'big, empty buses'...concern that VT should use smaller buses and that there are not many riders. As reported earlier in this summary, this group really has no idea the breadth of the services VT provides (as evidenced by the low numbers guessed). Despite not truly understanding the intricacies of VT, they still support the service and are in favor of doing whatever it takes to maintain service to our Fox Cities communities.
- Since this group does not use VT themselves, there was little conversation about the bus stops or the main transit center.
- If the people interviewed were armed with concise VT messaging, they would talk about the services and the issues surrounding public transportation, as well as promote this to their employees.