



willems marketing

Valley Transit Focus Groups Summary – February 2013

FOCUS GROUP GOALS

The target population for these focus groups was comprised of community and “thought leaders” in the Fox Valley, including members from local social service agencies, the education sector and local businesses.

The focus groups provided a method of acquiring data for a sample of the target population in the following areas:

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

Pre-session questions were also asked of the participants to gain a better understanding of their own personal feelings and perceptions of those taking the bus.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Willems Marketing conducted three focus groups at different times and locations in the Fox Cities, including Appleton, Kimberly and Neenah.

Focus groups were attended by adult men and women in the Fox Cities. Attendance at the focus groups ranged from four to eight people.

The attendees were asked to participate in discussion and 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:

The majority of the participants in the focus groups estimated that there were at least 500,000 rides in 2012 in our communities. When the actual number of rides was revealed, most people were very surprised.

There's definitely the perception that people who use public transportation aren't able to afford a car or are unable to drive...didn't consider that they may ride the bus for another reason (green, economy). A common theme throughout each session revolved around the question of "In our community, why would anyone want to ride the bus, when they can drive?" It took quite some time for people to begin considering other scenarios and reasons people would want to ride the bus.

Interesting to note: While environmental reasons were raised on a number of occasions during the pre-session interviews, the green aspect of taking the bus did not carry much weight in the actual focus group discussions.

It was also very apparent there is a lack of knowledge of the transit system as a whole – navigation, how to pay, etc. – which ultimately causes a declined comfort level for those considering riding the bus. There is also a lack of access to certain areas in the Fox Valley at certain times. Many are not accustomed to the length of time it takes to take the bus and feel it just wouldn't work with their schedules (or their employee's schedules). There was discussion in all sessions about the need for employers to be more flexible with work schedules to allow employees the option of taking the bus to/from work... or the bus system to adjust routes and times to allow for more practical scheduling.

Economic impact popular response:

While all would seem to agree that mass transit is a value to our community, to providing ways for people to continue education and spurs the economy, there seemed to be a bit of a disconnect with how it effects each person personally. The non-profit and education sector participants certainly had more of an opinion on how large its impact really is. To the non-profits that provide basic needs, mass transit is essential. Clients need it for so many reasons and without it this population group would be segregated and unable to access healthcare, education or employment.

In one session, there was actually a more in-depth discussion about the economic impact of car sales in the area (and the money put into convincing everyone they can and should own a car). Very few people in the sessions (or other people they associate with) strive to take the bus due to the emphasis on car ownership (making it seem like the only option for maneuvering around the area).

In general, the groups felt that the public has a sense of discomfort when thinking about taking the bus. How long will it take? Which bus do I take? Is it safe? All of this leads to less people riding the bus... ultimately impacting the ridership of the transit system.

Operational understanding of Valley Transit - popular response:

All participants believed that Valley Transit is funded through federal dollars and that ridership fees are a very small portion of their revenue base. Others felt that VT receives some money from state and local municipalities, but couldn't further define how or from whom.

After discussing how VT is funded, participants were asked if there are other ways the bus system could operate more efficiently or better serve the Fox Cities. The goal of this question was to generate discussion on their own regarding a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) as an option for the Fox Cities area. While only a small amount of people in each group thought of an RTA on their own, the concept of looking at public transportation regionally came up quite often. There were other ideas tossed about, including using bio-diesel fuel, compressed natural gas, increasing the number of routes to increase the number of riders and getting businesses to incentivize the use of the bus for their employees.

Future of public transportation:

There was definitely a mix of reactions in each focus group when the word "tax" came up in support of Valley Transit or an RTA. The Appleton group was on board with any type of tax that would help support the transit system, but definitely felt there was a lack of education in the community to get everyone else to support it. The Kimberly group hesitated when it came to the idea of a tax increase to support Valley Transit. A few of them felt they would need more of a cost analysis and data to make a decision to go one way or another. Another participant sees contributing to the transit system as more of a "charitable thing" rather than including it in a tax. The Neenah group supported a tax, but wanted clear feedback on how those dollars would be managed after that.

Interesting note: When the idea of "charitable support" came up, there was much discussion about how if people value public transportation as an important community entity, people would step up and fund it on a donation basis. At the end of that conversation line, people were not convinced that the community would do that as there are so many basic needs that don't receive the funding they need, it would be difficult to compete for donor dollars without a compelling human need.

In each group, there was at least one participant who was knowledgeable about an RTA. These participants helped to drive the conversation surrounding this topic. While the majority felt this seemed like a legitimate option for the Fox Cities given the current circumstance, the additional tax became focus of many of the conversations. Even if they would support it, getting the government (legislators) and the communities to support it would be difficult during a time when raising taxes is perceived as a negative thing.

When discussing the cap on property taxes in order to fund transit through a local sales tax, there were again mixed feelings. There were a couple of participants that brought up the conservative attitudes in our area about keeping the sales tax down. Why would there be an exception for an RTA? Others felt that a sales tax

seemed like it was hiding the tax and that the government hasn't historically been very adept at segmenting taxes after they're received the monies – an issue of credibility.

Demographic Information – popular responses:

- Role in the community: A blend of foundation leaders, non-profits, schools and community leaders
- Employees who take the bus: The participants from educational institutions all had employees who rode the bus. Other than that, only three other people thought they had employees who rode the bus.
- Age range: 30s – 70s
- Gender: 12 females, 7 males
- Education Level: Every participant had a college degree and 6 had their master's degree

Every single participant has relied on public transportation at some point in their life, but only a couple of them have relied on public transportation here in the Fox Cities. The remainder of the participants have relied on it while traveling in big cities or in other countries as tourists and when in college.

Few could identify a time when they felt they would need to rely on public transportation at this stage in their life. One participant did note that we're all "one accident away from needing to use public transportation". Quite a few mentioned they would like to try to ride the bus or take it more often, but are completely overwhelmed by the system and how to navigate the routes. This was such a predominant factor in all three sessions that we ended this line of discussion by us giving them all the maps and challenged them to ride within 30 days and asked that they report back to us the details of their experience.

Strengths, weaknesses and other comments regarding Valley Transit:

The "Rack n' Roll" program, bus drivers, clean buses, handicap accessibility, the leadership/management during difficult times, the addition of the Connector and the newer look (advertisements) of the buses were some of the positive points mentioned in discussion.

Lack of knowledge of the system and who it serves, the transit center (both in Appleton and Neenah), community perception and lack of environmentally friendly buses were a few of the negative points discussed. One of the most notable negative topics brought up throughout each focus group was the perception of the transit center in Appleton and the hub in Neenah. The crowds that hang out at the transit center, whether riding the bus or not, shine an undesirable light on Valley Transit and fuels the "unsafe" thoughts that top vindications for not taking the bus.

KEY FINDINGS

- It was evident that all groups felt that there is a definite need for increased community education surrounding Valley Transit from an operational/ease-of-use standpoint to a higher level of understanding at a political and funding standpoint. The participants who have (or who have attempted) taken the bus all felt that it can be confusing and a long process.

Tactics to support that strategy:

- *A community service announcement may help highlight positive bus riders – people in the community, etc.*
- *Get the support of some business leaders and have them ride the bus – along with their employees*

It was very obvious that people who have ‘successfully’ navigated the transit or had a positive mass transit experience at some point in their life, were much more supportive and willing to learn more. That indicates the need to educate people (children) at a young age.

- The impact of the loss of a transit system in the Fox Cities needs to be publicly addressed so residents/taxpayers can fully recognize its importance to the vitality of our community. The future of Valley Transit and an RTA should be at the top of the list. One participant made a statement referencing the need for a community to grow in order to be vital, and without mass transit a city cannot grow, it dies. In one of the sessions, there was extreme interest in learning how community residents can help promote the RTA option (at any level...community or legislative).
- Work surrounding how to improve the look and company at the transit center may be a wise idea in order to help paint a better picture of bus riders. Parents whose students could ride the city bus to school, choose not to use that option because of the transfer at the downtown bus station.