

Milwaukee's Transit System: A Way of Life

BY KENNETH J. WARREN AND MICHAEL E. VEBBER

Milwaukee County provides many amenities that enhance the quality of life for Milwaukeeans and visitors alike. The amenities include a world-class zoo, an outstanding park system, a nationally recognized natural history museum, and a superior all-bus public transportation system.

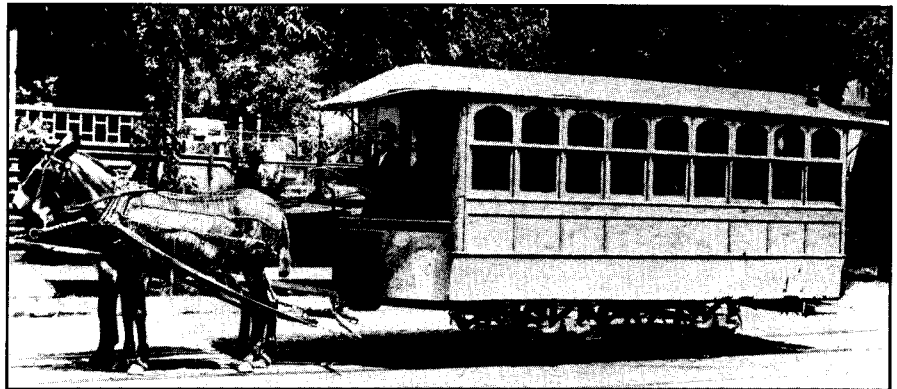
The Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS), created in 1975, currently operates a fleet of 560 buses over 65 routes throughout Milwaukee County. In 1989 56.2 million passengers rode MCTS buses to work, school, shopping, and recreation—an average of over 60 rides per year by each Milwaukee County resident. But this is only the latest chapter in the history of public transit in Milwaukee.

Public transportation has been a way of life in Milwaukee for more than 130 years. That history has been marked by an evolution of equipment and operating innovations. Over the years Milwaukeeans have ridden on horse-drawn and electric streetcars, trackless trolley buses, gasoline buses, and the diesel buses that now make up the entire fleet. Among its past management innovations, Milwaukee can claim the invention of the weekly bus pass and the development of the nation's first park-ride freeway express bus service.

For 115 years the private operation of the public transit system was completely funded by passenger fares. This became increasingly difficult as public transit in Milwaukee and across the country experienced significant decreases in rider-

ship. Post-war urban sprawl fueled by the private automobile reduced urban density and made service expansion to the suburbs very costly. Throughout the country, privately owned transit systems found it impossible to operate at a profit and were sold to local units of govern-

ment. On July 1, 1975, public transit in Milwaukee became the last major privately owned system in the country to pass to public ownership when Milwaukee County acquired the transit system and created the Milwaukee County Transit System.



Horse-drawn streetcars operated in Milwaukee in 1860.



Diesel-powered buses currently provide transit service in Milwaukee. This bus was placed in service in 1990.

Under public ownership the transit system has continued its tradition of providing Milwaukee with safe, reliable, and affordable transit services. The operating policies for the transit system are established by the county executive and the board of supervisors of Milwaukee County. The implementation of these policies, as well as the day-to-day operation of the transit system, is the charge of Milwaukee Transport Services, Inc. (MTS). MTS is a private, nonprofit transit management corporation; it has managed the transit system since it was acquired by Milwaukee County in 1975. The transit system's 1,500 employees are

employees of MTS, not Milwaukee County.

This unique situation permits public funding and policy decisions of MCTS to be made by Milwaukee County, while day-to-day operating decisions are made under private-sector management principles. The advantages of this organizational structure can best be documented by the fact that the number of general administrative employees of MCTS is 50 percent lower than the average for systems of similar size.

Over the past 16 years, the transit system has continually set high standards for its employees and overall operation.

As a result, under public ownership, ridership has increased over 27 percent, while passenger-miles operated has increased only 15 percent. Despite rising costs in a competitive labor market, MCTS has been able to maintain a cost-effective operation at a high level of efficiency. When compared with similar-sized transit systems, MCTS continually ranks at the top in rides per capita (60.7), passengers per bus-mile (3.89), expense per passenger (\$0.91), and cost per mile (\$3.56) (see Table 1). A recent performance audit of MCTS, performed for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, concluded that "MCTS' performance compared to that of peer systems is exceptionally good."¹

In 1987 MCTS was recognized for its sustained high level of performance, when it was presented with the American Public Transit Association's Outstanding Achievement Award.

Since receiving the award, the transit system has not rested on its laurels. Continuing in the tradition of innovation, the transit system has received numerous awards for the implementation of innovative and effective marketing and management programs. These include awards from the National Association of Counties for innovations in the use of futures contracts for the purchase of diesel fuel, minority youth employment, deep discount for the purchase of multiple-use fares, antidrug programs, special bus routes, and attendance improvement programs.

Innovations do not stop with awards. Because of the strong tradition of transit ridership, Milwaukee has come to depend on its transit system to meet all transportation needs. Whether it is all-night free rides on New Year's eve, a ballgame or concert at Milwaukee County Stadium, a festival at the lakefront, or a circus parade in downtown Milwaukee, MCTS is there working with event promoters and providing quality service that the community has come to expect.

In addition to operating innovations, MCTS also boasts of having some of the finest administrative and maintenance facilities in the transit industry.

Since 1981, all the MCTS maintenance and bus storage facilities have been either rebuilt or remodeled. This \$33-million renovation program has enabled MCTS to replace or upgrade aging

Table 1. Operating Statistics Comparative Peer-Group Analysis

	MCTS	Peer-Group Average
Cost per Passenger	\$ 0.91	\$ 1.82
Cost per Mile	\$ 3.56	\$ 3.74
Cost per Hour	\$43.19	\$54.55
Average Fare	\$ 0.41	\$ 0.46
Subsidy per Passenger	\$ 0.51	\$ 1.19
Revenue Hours per Driver (annual)	1,845	1,487
Passengers per Mile	3.89	2.09
Passengers per Hour	50.07	34.91
Rides per Capita (annual)	60.72	27.64

SOURCE: Cited reference 1.



The Fleet Maintenance Building Mechanical Repair Division, opened in 1988, is among the most modern in the transit industry.

buildings with modern facilities and state-of-the-art equipment. The highlight of this renovation program was the construction of the new Fleet Maintenance Building, which opened in January 1988. This \$17-million, 215,000-square-foot facility is the work site for 200 employees in the mechanical and unit repair divisions, the body and paint division, the building and grounds division, the central storeroom, and the maintenance department's administrative and training offices. The new facility was designed to provide improved heating, ventilation, lighting, security, and the most advanced equipment available. Specific features include an engine exhaust heat reclamation system; a computer-controlled heating system; a computerized, three-axle wheel alignment machine; a central lubrication system; and an electronic forklift guidance system in the central storeroom. Taken together, these facilities provide MCTS with state-of-the-art maintenance facilities.

As Milwaukee looks ahead, transit will play a major role in shaping the future. As concerns grow over freeway congestion, the environment, and fuel availability, any solution will have to include an expanded transit role.

Reference

1. John T. Doolittle & Associates, Inc. *Milwaukee County Transit System Performance Audit*. Milwaukee, Wis.: Doolittle & Associates, 1990.

For a close-up look at the fleet maintenance facility for the Milwaukee County Transit System, sign up for the technical tour to be held Wednesday, September 25, as part of the ITE 61st Annual Meeting. See the Annual Meeting program and registration information included in this issue of *ITE Journal*. Space is limited, so early registration is advised.



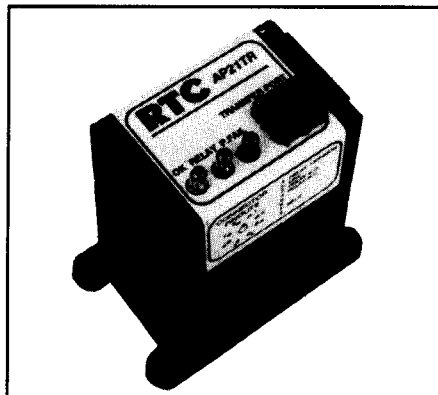
Kenneth J. Warren is vice-president and director of operations for Milwaukee Transport Services, Inc., the private firm that manages and operates the Milwaukee County Transit System. He is directly responsible for the operation of the transportation, maintenance, schedule, management information, and materials management departments. Warren has a B.S. from Ripon College and an M.S. in urban and regional planning from the University of Wisconsin. He is an Associate Member of ITE, a member and past-chairman of the Wisconsin Urban Transit Association, and a member of the Transportation Research Board.



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