



**Appendix B: Community and Stakeholder Outreach
Summary of Phase 1 Findings
October 2015**

Table of Contents

	Page
1 Introduction.....	1
NextGen’s Public Involvement Plan	1
Phase 1: Community Engagement Methods	3
2 Summary of Findings	6
Overview.....	6
Implications for the Needs Assessment	8
3 Individual and Small Group Discussions	10
Overview.....	10
Findings: Perceptions & Experiences	11
Findings: Vision	13
Findings: Opportunities	14
Findings: Challenges and Strategies.....	16
4 Public Meetings and Stakeholder Workshops	18
Overview.....	18
Key Findings: Transit Investment Priorities and Guiding Values.....	18
Key Findings: Transit Needs and Gaps.....	22
5 Non-Traditional Community Engagement Strategies	24
Overview.....	24
Comments from Neighborhood Sessions and Presentations.....	24
Comments Provided via Web.....	25
Connect Columbus	26

Appendix B.1 - Summary of Activities

Appendix B.2 - Organizations Participating in Stakeholder Interviews

Appendix B.3 - Handouts Used in Public Meetings

Appendix B.4 - Meeting Summaries

Appendix B.5 - Meeting Materials

Table of Figures

	Page
Figure 1: Summary of Phase 1 Outreach Activities	5
Figure 2: Results of Structured Exercise: Number of Votes for Each of the Six Transit Values.....	19
Figure 3: Community Meeting and Stakeholder Workshops: Ideas for Transit Investment Needs	23

1 INTRODUCTION

The Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) is undertaking a planning effort, COTA Next Generation 2050 (branded as “NextGen”), to explore central Ohio’s future public transportation needs. The plan is designed to create a long-term perspective on transit investment opportunities and will guide transit development through 2050.

Central Ohio, like urban areas everywhere, is changing. Changes reflect, in part, an increase in the number of people and jobs in the region, as well as societal and demographic changes, as the region responds to shifting societal values, emerging technologies, and evolving opportunities. As the region adapts, there will be demand for more and different types of regional services, including schools and housing, but also public transportation. Preparing for these changes gives central Ohio residents an opportunity to rethink the role transit plays in the overall transportation network. NextGen is designed to explore and guide that process. Within this context, the overarching goals of NextGen are to:

- Lead the community in a visioning exercise to determine what central Ohio’s public transportation system needs to accomplish in the coming decades to ensure current and future residents have access to jobs, housing, education, and services
- Prepare central Ohio for future growth by identifying transit investments that integrate with regional plans and goals, including regional competitiveness, minimal sprawl and demographic preferences
- Create transit investment options to support local and regional efforts to develop transit oriented development and communities
- Identify conventional and creative revenue options that offer potential to support the recommended plan and ensure the plan can be implemented

The NextGen project was designed to be developed with extensive input from members of the community, including stakeholders and elected officials, but also people who live and work in central Ohio. This technical memo summarizes the findings from the first phase of public outreach activities. The memo is organized so that this introductory section includes an overview of the public engagement process and activities, followed by a summary of findings generated across all of the public engagement activities. Remaining chapters of the report are organized by the three main types of public engagement activities: stakeholder interviews and small group discussions; public meetings and workshops; and non-traditional community engagement through neighborhood sessions and presentations as well as online input.

NextGen’s Public Involvement Plan

One of the first steps in the NextGen project was to develop a public involvement plan (PIP). The purpose of the PIP was to describe the methods the COTA NextGen team plans to use to engage and communicate with central Ohio residents throughout the 18 month study timeframe.

Like the overall study, the COTA and the study team laid out specific goals for the public engagement process:

1. Develop an extensive, inclusive community and stakeholder engagement plan that includes a variety of techniques to engage a breadth of perspectives throughout the transit service area.
2. Ensure that audiences that traditionally have not participated in public transportation issues are provided an opportunity to have their voices reflected in the Plan, particularly Environmental Justice and Title VI populations.
3. Create support for implementing the recommendations and projects outlined by COTA NextGen.
4. Provide the study team with a framework for identifying and assigning responsibilities to achieve the objectives of the Public Involvement Plan, while allowing for flexibility and creativity as new ideas emerge.

As part of achieving these goals, the public involvement and outreach process was also organized around three rounds of engagement, each of which is tied to specific technical phases of the project. This memo summarizes the community engagement process and findings resulting from the initial phase of the NextGen study.

PHASE 1 VISION, NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES (AND PROJECT START UP)

The first phase of the NextGen plan was designed to establish the overall vision and goals for the future of public transit in central Ohio. The first phase involved a technical assessment of transit needs to reflect community input, regional forecasts for growth and development, and local and regional projects developed through other community planning efforts. This assessment identified a list of corridors, communities and neighborhoods where additional investment in public transit is desired in the short- and long-term. An evaluation framework was also developed to rank and prioritize geographic areas for high-capacity transit investments.

The public involvement efforts that accompanied and supported the technical analysis included organizing a Project Advisory Group (PAG), developing a website, and extensive meetings and events with stakeholders and members of the public. This phase of outreach began in March 2015 and ended in June 2015.

PHASE 2 DEFINE AND EVALUATE ALTERNATIVES

The second phase of the NextGen project will involve developing a series of transit projects and initiatives designed to strengthen the overall system. The team will also prioritize the geographic areas identified for high-capacity transit investment into a shorter, more focused list. The draft projects – or alternatives – will be brought to the public for comment and input.

Like all phases of the NextGen effort, public engagement is critical to the success of Phase 2. The public involvement team will work with the technical team to describe and present the alternatives to the community. The team will develop a series of exercises for the public to identify preferences and suggest new or different ideas. The team will use web-based tools as well as public meetings, workshops and neighborhood events. This phase is expected to take place between July 2015 and December 2015.

PHASE 3 RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The third and final phase of the NextGen project will translate the preferred alternatives into a transit investment plan, including a phased implementation schedule and project funding recommendations. The final product of the effort will be the NextGen Transit Plan.

The public involvement team will engage the community to review and refine project recommendations, phasing and funding options. The public involvement materials will detail how public input shaped the analysis and outcomes. The goal is to build support and momentum for the recommendations, as COTA moves toward implementation. This final phase will occur between January 2016 and April 2016.



Phase 1: Community Engagement Methods

NextGen’s Phase 1 community engagement efforts included in-depth leader interviews, small stakeholder group discussions, workshops, public meetings, Project Advisory Group meetings, and presenting information at pre-existing community events. The project team used the early outreach activities (interviews and small group discussions) to broadly collect ideas for the future of central Ohio and perceptions of the role that transit plays in that future. The team used these conversations to understand and define community values surrounding transit investment (i.e. why transit is important). In subsequent outreach activities, the team worked with community members and stakeholders to refine and prioritize these values.

In total, COTA staff and the NextGen team sponsored, participated, and/or staffed 40 public engagement activities between March 1, 2015 and June 15, 2015 (see Appendix B.2.1). Activities were held in downtown Columbus, the South Side, Short North, Grove City, Dublin, Westerville, Gahanna, and Worthington. More than 500 comments were received through Phase 1 outreach activities from people who attended a meeting, participated in an interview, or submitted comments either online or in paper formats. Specific strategies used in the Phase 1 community engagement process included:

- **Project Advisory Group Meetings** –This 30+-member group includes representatives from broad geographic and diverse interests. The group met twice during Phase 1 activities. Meeting materials and summaries from the two PAG meetings are included in the appendices. Roughly 22 unique individuals participated in PAG meetings.¹
- **Key Leader Interviews** – The NextGen team conducted key leader interviews (see Appendix B.2 for a list of participating organizations). The goal of these interviews was to

¹ PAG membership was not counted in the number of people participating in the public engagement activities.

tell stakeholders about NextGen and collect insights into their expectations for transit service development. Eighteen interviews were conducted.

- **Targeted Stakeholder Small Group Meetings** – Young professionals, older adults, people with disabilities, new Americans, low income and other under-represented voices can be challenging to engage using traditional outreach methods. Recognizing the importance of these groups, the study team facilitated five targeted stakeholder group meetings with representatives of agencies who specialize in working with these groups and/or with representatives of these target groups. A total of 24 individuals participated in these meetings.
- **Public Meetings** – The NextGen team held six public meetings, including meetings in Downtown Columbus (2), Dublin, Westerville, the South Side and Grove City. An online version of the public meeting materials was also posted to the project website and promoted heavily. The meetings were designed in a workshop format. The team provided an overview presentation explaining the meeting purpose and expectations, followed by interactive discussion exercises designed to solicit focused, practical input on priority values and where to locate future transit investments. Publicity efforts included news releases, fliers, web postings, social media notifications, email blasts, and paid advertisements in Columbus Underground, Columbus Post and an online news platform that included the Columbus Dispatch, local television stations, CNN, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today . PAG members and local hosts in Dublin, Westerville, Columbus, and Grove City also spread the word through their networks. In total, 95 people participated in at least one of the public meetings.
- **Targeted Workshops** - As a complement to the public meetings, the NextGen team hosted three workshops with economic development staff, transportation and planning professionals, and suburban stakeholders. The workshops presented similar information to what was used for the public meetings, but the approach was tailored towards each audience. While the meetings were open to any member of the public, the study team emailed invitations to these targeted groups. A combined total of 46 people participated in the three workshops.
- **Neighborhood Sessions** – The public involvement team also held three neighborhood sessions that consisted of project booths or tables that were located and staffed in high traffic areas as part of community events. These events included an Earth Day celebration, a young professionals conference, and a Latino job fair. Roughly 129 people provided input to the plan at these events.
- **Presentations, Other Public Meetings and Online Input** – The NextGen team made presentations and distributed materials about the project at stakeholder group meetings and Connect Columbus public meetings. The public was also invited to provide comments or ask questions on the project website. An estimated 225 individuals provided comments through these forums.

Figure 1: Summary of Phase 1 Outreach Activities

Outreach Activity	Number of Events	Location	Dates	Number of Participants
Project Advisory Group Meetings	2	Downtown Columbus	March 12 May 20	22 18
Community Leader Interviews	18	Various	March and May	18
Targeted Stakeholder Meetings	4	Downtown Columbus	March	24
Public Meetings	6	Columbus, Dublin, Westerville, South Side and Grove City	April and June	95
Stakeholder Workshops	3	Columbus Dublin	April and June	46
Neighborhood Sessions	3	Dublin Worthington Columbus, Gahanna	May	129
Presentations, Online Comments and Connect Columbus	5 (not including online)	Various (and online)	March – June	225
Total	42	-	-	537*

Source: Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates and Engage Public Affairs

*Does not include PAG attendance

2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overview

The public engagement activities conducted as part of Phase 1 focused on understanding the community's vision for future transit investment. Discussions included collecting people's values and priorities for transit investment as well as understanding people's ideas about where transit investment will be needed in central Ohio.

The most consistent themes heard across all formats and interactions include:

- Strong level of support for public transportation in central Ohio
- COTA as an agency is effective and efficient
- Strong public transportation provides access to jobs, helps retain and attract professionals, and supports pedestrian-friendly development – all important components of a healthy community for the future
- More transit service is needed now and in the future (*Clearly and strongly voiced by both people attending meetings in downtown Columbus as well as in the suburban communities*)
 - More regular bus service (i.e. more service frequency, longer hours of operation, more service on weekends and weekday evenings)
 - More and better facilities (more shelters, more bike racks)
 - Different types of service
 - Rail service – most support light rail, but also streetcar and commuter rail
 - CBUS-style circulator in other downtown Columbus neighborhoods and suburban communities
- More investment and better use of technology is necessary to make the system easier to use.
 - Information (signage, service information, next bus information)
 - Cashless fare payment

“Stop thinking and talking big – let’s act big – the community is ready for transformative investments.”

A small contingent of participants expressed ambivalence about public transportation in central Ohio. While not necessarily against transit, these individuals had never used the system, didn't know anyone who had used it, and were not convinced of its value.

Vision, Values and Priorities

A key part of the Phase 1 community engagement activities involved understanding why people think transit is important to central Ohio and understanding the role they envision transit playing in central Ohio's future. Opportunities to comment on these important themes included providing general comments as well as participating in a structured activity. Common perceptions from this feedback include:

- Columbus and central Ohio are positioned for continued success and opportunity
 - A strong, reliable, and innovative public transportation system is critical
 - Transit is essential to a healthy downtown and must serve the region
- The vision for transit must be tied to economic development
 - Transit should encourage and guide development
 - Transit should provide access to jobs
 - Transit can attract and retain young professionals
- There has been a lack of investment in public transportation in central Ohio
 - Central Ohio is not positioned to make future investments in transit
 - Community leadership is not successfully positioning the region for transit investment
- There has been a lack of innovation in the existing transit system

Community Values and Priorities Guiding Transit Investment

Through the outreach process, the NextGen team identified a series of values or goals for what future transit investment should accomplish in central Ohio. An initial list of values was drafted based on conversations with key leaders and stakeholder groups and presented to the PAG in March 2015.

Through discussions with the PAG, these values were reworked and then presented at public meetings, community events, and targeted stakeholder workshops to collect further feedback throughout Phase 1 of the public outreach process. Attendees were shown the list of values were asked to vote for the values that they cared about the most, and also provide general feedback on the values regarding whether they appropriately captured the priorities of the community. As a result of this feedback some of the values were re-worded.

The top five values that emerged from those conversations were:

- **Make Better Connections:** extend transit's reach deeper into the communities it already serves
- **Invest in Overlooked Communities:** direct transit investment to specific corridors and neighborhoods
- **Build on Success:** make existing transit service more compelling
- **Save the Earth:** protect the environment and reduce greenhouse gases
- **Coordinate with Growth:** encourage inward growth and serve existing neighborhoods. Strengthen fast growing areas.

“Make Better Connections” earned the most votes in the outreach activities, and “Save the Earth” received the fewest. The remaining values received nearly equal numbers of votes. Geographic Investment Needs.

The majority of stakeholders felt that Central Ohio needs to invest in rail service. People had different opinions about the type of rail the region needed. Nearly every type of rail service was

mentioned – streetcars, light rail, commuter rail, and regional rail – but light rail emerged most often in the group conversations.

In terms of where transit service is needed, the most commonly cited locations included:

- Downtown Columbus
 - High Street – “existing development and the success of the CBUS make it a ‘sure thing’ for rail transit investment”
 - Broad Street
- Port Columbus International Airport to Downtown Columbus and Suburban Locations (*expressed by stakeholders who felt strongly that transit needs to get people to jobs*)
- Downtown Columbus to Suburban Communities
 - Link downtown residents with suburban job centers, such as Dublin, New Albany, Rickenbacker, Grove City and Westerville
 - Link suburban communities to downtown for both work and entertainment purposes
 - Best served by commuter rail
- Suburb-to-Suburb Connections – link suburban job centers to suburban residential communities
 - Growing suburban housing/jobs/shopping/entertainment centers, such as Easton, Polaris, Westerville, Hilliard, and Dublin
 - Service between all suburbs located along the I-270 “Outerbelt”
 - Service to warehouse and logistic jobs in New Albany and Rickenbacker (*Cited by New Americans and social service agency representatives*)
- Regional rail service to Chicago and East Coast cities

Implications for the Needs Assessment

Information collected through the Phase 1 community and stakeholder engagement process will influence technical aspects of the overall project.

Establishing Goals for Transit Investment Decisions

One of the most tangible applications of the community input is establishing goals and “values” for how central Ohio should invest in future transit projects and services. The goals will be used to screen, prioritize and evaluate project development and investment decisions. As such, the goals were incorporated into the Evaluation Framework.

As previously stated, the five goals that emerged from the Phase 1 outreach include: Make Better Connections, Invest in Overlooked Communities, Build on Success, Save the Earth, and Coordinate with Growth.

However, when these goals were shared with the PAG in July as the foundation for evaluation criteria to help screen proposed projects, the PAG suggested additional re-wording. Further edits will be reflected in the evaluation and outreach effort during Phase 2.

Identifying Geographic Needs

Another important application of the findings collected through the community engagement process is input regarding needs for future transit investment. These recommendations will be incorporated into the Needs Assessment. Ideas consistently coalesced around a handful of connections and corridors:

- Downtown Columbus and the High Street corridor through to the Ohio State University.
- Connections to, between and within the northern suburbs, including Dublin, Worthington, Westerville, New Albany, Gahanna, Polaris, and Easton.
- Connections to the Port Columbus International Airport, including service between downtown Columbus and the airport, but also connections from the suburbs (communities in north and south Franklin County) to the airport.
- Downtown to the southern suburbs, primarily Grove City, but also Groveport.

Identifying Other Community Interest and Values

Throughout the community engagement process, participants consistently and clearly identified investment in rail services and more attention to technology as high priorities. Given the enthusiasm, urgency and consistency with which they were raised, the NextGen team will consider opportunities to incorporate them into the project development process.

3 INDIVIDUAL AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Overview

The first community engagement tasks involved interviewing people individually and in small groups. In both cases, interviews focused on talking to people who have a clear stake in the current and future public transportation system in central Ohio.

In-depth interviews with individuals focused on speaking with people who individually or as representatives of organizations are actively involved in central Ohio's development and/or play a role in the funding and delivery of public transportation services. These people included elected officials, planning staff, and representatives from community organizations, businesses, and educational institutions, as well as individuals that represent unique interests and perspectives regarding public transportation.

The NextGen team also organized a series of small stakeholder group discussions. These meetings were designed to collect input from people who represent a segment of the population that tends to be frequent users of public transportation services and/or – for a variety of reasons – are difficult to engage through traditional outreach formats, such as public meetings. The targeted audience for these meetings included young professionals, New Americans, older adults, persons with disabilities, Latinos, Somalis, and representatives of social service organizations.

Key Leader Interviews

Interviews with key leaders were structured, one-on-one conversations. Each interview was conducted in person by a team of researchers. Interviewers followed a moderator's guide to facilitate the conversation and ensure consistent information was collected across all interviews. At the same time, however, interviewers were encouraged to let the conversation follow a natural flow and to probe topics of most interest to the key leader.

At the start of each interview, participants were told that the conversation would be anonymous and that they should be encouraged to speak freely. As a result, findings are summarized across all individuals who participated in the process. The list of people contacted for interviews was developed by COTA staff, with additional recommendations provided by members of the study team.

In total, the study team interviewed leaders representing approximately 18 organizations (see Appendix B.2).

Targeted Stakeholder Group Meetings

The small, targeted stakeholder group discussions were designed to engage groups that traditionally may be under-represented in public discussions and/or have unique perspectives and priorities regarding public transportation. The study team convened meetings at a central location (Columbus Public Health Department) and invited individuals to participate in the discussion. The invitation list was developed by the study team and reviewed and approved by COTA staff.

Meetings were facilitated, “focus group” style conversations, where participants were encouraged to speak freely and openly about their experiences, interests, and desires. The facilitator followed a moderator’s guide that provided structure to the conversation, but consistent with the key leader interviews, the facilitator also allowed the conversations to flow naturally.

The NextGen team convened five small groups – Young Professionals; New Americans/Somalis; Older Adults and Persons with Disabilities; Latino Representatives and Social Service Agencies. The original PIP called for six of these stakeholder group discussions, but the sixth small group discussion was replaced with a targeted workshop with transportation and planning officials from the northwest region of central Ohio.

Findings: Perceptions & Experiences

One of the first questions discussed with stakeholders was their perception of COTA and experience with the existing transit system. Most of the key leaders who were interviewed had no experience riding any COTA service other than the CBUS. This contrasts dramatically with the participants in the small stakeholder group discussions. These individuals – almost to a person – had a lot of experience with COTA. Many were regular riders of COTA services; others had constituents and clients who were regular riders.

As a result, most of the information on COTA’s existing service by community leaders is based on *perceptions*, while thoughts and insights provided by people in the small group exercises reflect *experience*. Given differences in the two groups’ experience with the existing transit service, findings related to COTA’s existing service are presented separately.

Key Leaders

Generally speaking, key community leaders said they viewed COTA as operating a reliable, safe, and clean public transportation system. They have respect for COTA leadership and staff and described the agency as competent. With a handful of exceptions, community leaders were also in agreement that public transportation is an essential public service.

With regards to the existing services, however, the interviews and conversations coalesced around two stories that were told consistently and repeatedly by community leaders about COTA. The first was about the CBUS and the second related to buses on High Street in downtown Columbus. These stories stand in contrast to each other because the first story (CBUS) exemplifies COTA’s ability to be responsive, innovative, and successful, while the second (buses on High Street) exemplifies a perception that COTA is unwilling to be responsive and innovative. These two stories are outlined in the text below, followed by additional perceptions about COTA as shared by community leaders.

CBUS Downtown Circulator

The CBUS is viewed as a gigantic success story, especially by those individuals who are active in downtown Columbus. They recounted using the CBUS to get to the convention center for a lunch meeting, taking it to get to Short North, or jumping on it for a few blocks because it is so convenient. To these stakeholders, the CBUS demonstrates the power and importance of public transportation in downtown Columbus and that public transportation can work in central Ohio. CBUS demonstrates to the broader downtown community that transit can support development by making crowded, densely populated areas accessible.

Buses on High Street

Downtown Columbus business leaders and developers expressed concerns about COTA operating too many buses on High Street and the stacking of buses along store fronts in downtown. This challenge is well documented and understood by COTA; as such, this is not recounted in detail here. The issue of buses on High Street is important for the NextGen planning process because future service projects need to balance downtown interest groups' desire to keep downtown accessible and open, with the travel needs of COTA's ridership to travel into downtown. The issue of buses on High Street also speaks to the broader issue of COTA's ability – real or perceived – to respond to the challenges and needs of interest groups, find common ground between competing interests, and build and foster partnerships.

Targeted Stakeholder Small Group Meetings

Participants in the stakeholder small group meetings had more experience riding COTA buses and interacting with COTA staff, compared to the interviewed key leaders. As a result, their insights and perspectives were more focused on what works and what does not work in the existing service network.

The majority support COTA and want COTA to succeed. They shared positive interactions with COTA staff and told stories about how COTA staff had personally helped them or one of their constituents. Many expressed the need for well-functioning public transportation, so that they personally or their organizations' clients can succeed. Participants in the stakeholder discussions also praised the CBUS and held it up as a model for future service development.

The Young Professional group had slightly different experiences and perspectives about COTA than other small group participants. These participants had ideas and perspectives in line with the community leaders related to regional competitiveness. They view COTA and transit as an essential part of the “package” required to bring Columbus to the national stage and make Columbus a “cool place to live”.

Though participants in other small group discussions were less focused than the Young Professionals Group on transit as a tool to enhance central Ohio's regional competitiveness, one participant in the meeting focusing on seniors and persons with disabilities expressed their belief that Columbus had lost the bid to host the Democratic National Convention due to a lack of public transportation options. Social service agency representatives and those serving new Americans also mentioned that getting their clients access to and from jobs at Rickenbacker was always a challenge.

Generally speaking, people who participated in the small group discussions framed their perceptions about COTA service into two categories: things that make the existing service difficult to use, or barriers; and ideas for service improvements. Barriers cited by nearly all bus

riders included COTA not having enough bus routes, going enough places, and/or operating at the most convenient times. Having to pay cash for a fare or and not knowing when the next bus is going to arrive were frequently noted frustrations. Participants of every group discussion suggested a cashless fare system and the need for more frequent service going more places.

Findings: Vision

People articulated their vision for public transportation in the context of their goals for the future of central Ohio. Although participants in the process had different perspectives and ideas, a handful of common themes emerged.

The most frequently cited opportunity regarding COTA's "next generation" was that Columbus and central Ohio are positioned for continued success and opportunity. People identified regional assets and strengths including a stable economy grounded in government, higher education, health care, and insurance as well as an emerging economy that is younger, more dynamic, and more entrepreneurial. They suggested a transit vision that would continue to serve these assets in the future, particularly a thriving downtown Columbus, the Bridge Street District in Dublin, potential growth opportunities along the CMAX bus rapid transit route on Cleveland Avenue, Port Columbus International Airport, and future job growth at Rickenbacker and New Albany.

Many stakeholders – even those who represented interests well beyond downtown Columbus -- also felt strongly that central Ohio's success requires a vibrant, successful downtown. Most stakeholders felt that the region had made tremendous strides in improving downtown Columbus and nearly all of them talked about how "hot" the downtown market is, in terms of real estate and development interests. However, stakeholders also expressed caution about downtown. While downtown is doing well and much better than it has in a long time, it still needs attention and care to remain a robust and resilient economic engine for the region by becoming stronger and more vibrant. The young professionals, in particular, suggested that transit could play a stronger role in downtown development by investing in light rail or streetcars. These participants downplayed their allegiance to any one type of transportation. They would take a bus, rail line, bike, car2go or Uber if it got them where they needed to go quickly, with little hassle. They want transit to be one of those viable options.

Stakeholders felt strongly that developing a strong, reliable, and innovative public transportation system is critical to central Ohio's success – both in downtown Columbus, but also regionally. These transit supporters cited the success of other U.S. cities, noting that almost all other large successful cities, like Charlotte and Denver, have made investments in light rail. Some participants discussed how rail can play a role in creating walkable, vibrant communities. They expressed their desire to see more of that transit-oriented development and active transportation infrastructure locally.

Most stakeholders felt the vision for public transportation needed to be tied to economic and workforce development. The sentiment was articulated by individuals and interest groups with

"There are great opportunities for Columbus coming and they will be in my lifetime."

"The uniqueness of Columbus is that we are still growing. Our future is still out there. We are attracting a younger crowd and have a lot of assets that should make it easier to create a transportation agenda."

ties to development and commerce as well as those representing human and social service interests. Stakeholders talked about the role of public transportation in encouraging and guiding development as well as ensuring that people can easily get to jobs and services.

Although the study team did not ask stakeholders to describe their vision for public transportation in terms of opportunities and challenges, their comments and insights were broadly grouped into these categories as a way to understand their ideas and perspectives.

Findings: Opportunities

Stakeholders expressed optimism about the future of Columbus and central Ohio, the importance of public transportation in Columbus' future, and the role that COTA could play. The following section describes what the stakeholders see as short and longer term opportunities for public transportation.

Economic Development

While there was near universal agreement that public transportation must play a critical role in the region's economic growth, stakeholders disagreed that the COTA system is currently a critical resource to the region's economic vitality. Participants in the small group discussions expressed an equity perspective that all central Ohioans have equal access to employment and opportunities.

Public transportation's role in economic development meant different things to different people. These perceptions fell into three categories: supporting workforce development, concentrating growth, and responding to current trends. For some, transit must ensure people have equal access to regional jobs and opportunities. For others, transit must help to concentrate and organize development; this group tended to support a strong downtown. Still other stakeholders felt its role is creating an urban landscape that responds to current trends and needs; these people were more likely to support an urban, car-free lifestyle.

Millennials, New Americans, and Baby Boomers

People identified three trends changing central Ohio and impacting the type of public transportation services that will be needed – Millennials, New Americans, and Baby Boomers.

Nearly every key leader interviewed spoke about the power and influence of the Millennials on central Ohio. They talked about this demographic group's importance to Columbus' image and economic health, and also their changing preferences and attitudes about life and work. Several stakeholders talked about their efforts to engage this demographic group and create products for them (housing and work sites). Many stakeholders, especially those with development interests, talked about some of their success getting Millennials to rent apartments and office space. When Millennials and young professionals were asked directly whether a great transit system would influence where they would choose to live, there was nearly unanimous agreement that it would. From their other

“Millennials are already changing the way transportation works in downtown Columbus, with Car2Go, CoGo and CBUS...it is amazing.”

comments, “great transit” seemed to mean rail lines, more frequent bus service running around the clock, and more technology to make riding transit as convenient as possible.

Consistent with the potential power of Millennials, many stakeholders also felt there is potential to work more closely with students, including OSU, but also other area colleges and universities, including Columbus State, Capital University, Franklin University and Ohio Dominican University. Most are familiar with the COTA/OSU student pass program, and thought it could be replicated elsewhere.

New Americans were also identified as a group, especially by people in the small group discussions, as having a strong influence on travel patterns in central Ohio. Most New Americans look to public transportation to meet their travel needs when they first arrive in the U.S., but they are surprised find that it doesn’t take them directly to jobs, it’s not frequent enough to be convenient, and it takes hours on a bus to get where they need to go. This is usually in stark contrast to their home country. As soon as they get a job here many buy a car so they don’t have to rely on transit unless they find jobs located along a frequent route close to their homes.

Others talked about changing demographics in terms of the aging population and how people entering retirement years are looking for different lifestyles. Key leaders talked about retiring baby boomers moving into downtown apartments and emerging transit-oriented suburbs like Dublin and Westerville, where they can walk, bike or bus to restaurants and shopping and not worry about the maintenance of a larger home. Members of the small group discussions talked about the need for more specialized transportation service such as demand response and more late night bus service for those working second and third shifts.

Ohio State University

Many felt that the Ohio State University represents a tremendous opportunity for the region and COTA specifically. These thoughts were more strongly expressed by key leaders as compared with people participating in the stakeholder discussions.

Key leaders identified OSU as a tremendous regional and local asset and a potential partner for COTA. This is true in a physical sense (big campus, lots of students, faculty, and staff) but also politically. The school has a lot of clout, which makes it an important partner for any public agency trying to accomplish anything in central Ohio.

One stakeholder talked about how, historically, OSU has not marketed itself as being in downtown Columbus and people from out of town are sometimes surprised to learn that the OSU campus is in downtown Columbus. However, this sentiment is changing. Consistent with some of the trends cited previously that favor urban lifestyles, OSU has recognized that being an urban campus makes it more attractive. Stakeholders also talked about how OSU is another “downtown” both in Columbus and the region. There are a lot of people on campus and more that travel to and from campus every day.

“OSU has never really had a beautiful campus but it is trying to do better and investing in improving its environment....OSU is becoming more urban, more hip and more proud of its urban setting.”

Related to OSU, one stakeholder talked about the opportunity created by the OSU Health Care facility. This is a major facility and is located in a neighborhood that is perceived to be unsafe. COTA should play a major role in making that facility more accessible, and concentrate on making people feel safe in getting there by providing frequent service with attractive, well-lit transit shelters; real-time arrival information; and other amenities to make the area feel more secure.

New Services

COTA has an opportunity with the success they have achieved with new and upcoming services, including CBUS and the bus rapid transit (BRT) service. Many cited having a positive experience riding the CBUS, noting its frequency, free fare and attractive, branded buses. The CBUS creates an opportunity for COTA to build on, potentially by expanding the concept and creating new partnerships. Many people said they were looking forward to the new bus rapid transit (BRT) service.

Findings: Challenges and Strategies

While many key leaders and participants in the targeted stakeholder meetings were optimistic about both central Ohio and COTA, they were also able to identify challenges COTA faces in crafting a vision for its future.

COTA's role in the community – both historically and currently – has been to provide bus service. . According to the interviewees, COTA has not been at the forefront of regional or Columbus-specific issues. While COTA explored rail investments in the past, its focus during the last decade has been primarily on improving bus service. Disappointment lingers that COTA did not pursue light rail harder in the past and that COTA was not more engaged on a City of Columbus proposal to pursue a streetcar. Also, the controversy over removing buses from High Street led many to believe COTA was following the conversation rather than driving it. As a result, the agency has not established itself as an entity that adds value to the community and the region. People do not look to COTA to be a part of important regional projects.

A similar but somewhat different perspective was described as COTA not articulating a clear vision about what they are currently trying to accomplish for central Ohio. Stakeholders said that, because it is not clear to them what COTA is trying to accomplish, it is not clear to them how to help or what they can do.

People also felt that COTA historically has not done a good job fostering relationships and partnerships. When COTA needs resources or asks community support for an initiative, COTA does not have any accumulated good will or social and political capital. Others felt COTA struggles to be nimble, innovative and responsive. COTA's continued lack of real time arrival information and a convenient fare system came up multiple times as examples of COTA lagging behind other transit systems. One stakeholder articulated this sentiment by talking about their involvement in getting the CBUS off the ground.

In terms of articulating and making COTA's vision a reality, stakeholders had ideas about the strategic approach for COTA and how the agency may position itself to fulfill this vision.

Several stakeholders recommended using demonstration projects to test and develop ideas. Demonstration projects also provide an appropriate venue and forum for COTA to engage and work with stakeholders and members of the public to build new and different partnerships. They felt COTA should build confidence and momentum through a series of small successes. This would both lead to the public having more confidence in COTA, as well as helping COTA be

more confident internally. Stakeholders really liked the idea of capitalizing on the success of the CBUS.

A similar strategy recommended by the stakeholders is that COTA should be more open to new ideas and try new things. Some stakeholders said, to them, it felt like COTA should be perceived by more people as an agency that can and will say yes.

Incorporating technology is also an important component for young professionals and people with disabilities. To these stakeholders, incorporating technology means providing information through a variety of formats that makes it easy to use the system and know when their buses will come. They also want COTA to accommodate personal technology by providing wifi on vehicles and offering fare payment by smartphone or debit card.

Consistent with this message, several stakeholders also said that both this study and COTA need to carefully consider the impact of technology on transportation choices. The region needs to be careful not to invest in systems that will be outdated when they open.

4 PUBLIC MEETINGS AND STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOPS

Overview

Among the different community engagement strategies used in the first phase of the NextGen study, two involved holding public meetings and workshops with targeted stakeholder groups. Each of the three workshops focused on one of the following groups: economic development professionals, transportation advocates, transportation and planning professionals in northwest central Ohio. The purpose of the strategies were to introduce the NextGen study; ask for input on guiding principles and values for future public transportation investments; and discuss where transit services are needed in central Ohio currently and in the future.

The format and content of the materials were very similar. The NextGen team used a combination of presentations, facilitated discussion, and hands-on exercises to engage participants. The primary difference between the two types of meetings was the audience. Although both meetings were open to all members of the public, the stakeholder workshops were targeted around targeted specific audiences representing a common interest in public transit.

The first round of public meetings (held April 23rd) was advertised through social media, mass emails, newspaper announcements, and advertisements local newspapers and online news forums. The second round of public meetings (week of June 1st) were promoted through social media, mass emails and electronic meeting invitations. Workshop participants were invited through electronic meeting invitations.

In total, the NextGen team organized and staffed six public meetings and three targeted stakeholder workshops. The meetings were held throughout Franklin County, including downtown Columbus as well as suburban locations in northern and southern Franklin County. In total, 95 people participated in the community meetings and 46 participated in the stakeholder workshops.

Key Findings: Transit Investment Priorities and Guiding Values

One of the key objectives of the community meetings was to understand people's "values" related to why the region should invest in public transit. The NextGen team organized a structured exercise for participants to choose "values" followed by a facilitated conversation about these choices.

The NextGen team originally presented a series of five values, and then added one based on public input at a stakeholder meeting for economic development officials. The values represent

reasons for why investment in transit service is important, as well as goals or objectives for what transit investment should accomplish in central Ohio. These values evolved out of the stakeholder interviews and small group discussions and were refined by both the Project Advisory Group and input collected at the community meetings.

The six values presented to meeting participants were:

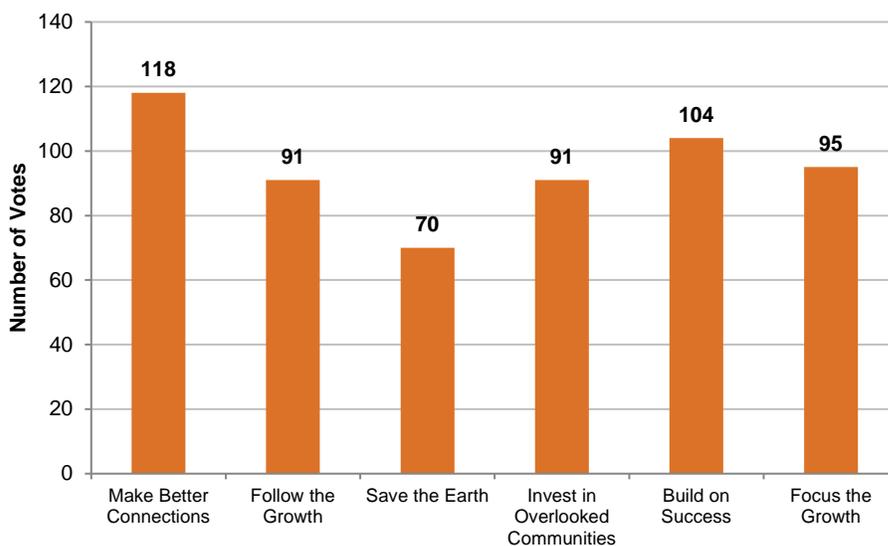
1. **Make Better Connections:** extend transit’s reach deeper into the communities it already serves.
2. **Invest in Overlooked Communities:** direct investment to specific corridors and neighborhoods.
3. **Follow the Growth:** strengthen fast growing areas.
4. **Build on Success:** make existing transit service more compelling.
5. **Save the Earth:** protect the environment and reduce greenhouse gases.
6. **Focus the Growth:** use new transit investments to attract and concentrate growth.

Structured Exercise

At the community events/neighborhood sessions, people were encouraged to review the values, ask questions, and then rank them. In the more structured public meetings, people were encouraged to vote for the three values they believed were most important to guide transit investment. People voted verbally and on paper (see Appendix B.3). Across all formats, the NextGen team collected roughly 569 votes cast by an estimated 200 people.

The structured exercise revealed that, among the six choices provided, Make Better Connections received the most votes with 118, or 21% of all votes. Build on Success received the second highest number of votes, with 104 (18%). However, the next three values (Focus the Growth (17%), Invest in Overlooked Communities (16%) and Follow the Growth (16%) were valued similarly. Save the Earth received the lowest number of votes (12%) by a significant margin.

Figure 2: Results of Structured Exercise: Number of Votes for Each of the Six Transit Values



Source: Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates

The results differed slightly by meeting locations. Analyzing the results in a more nuanced manner, by meeting type and location, gives insight into which values are more or less important to different subgroups of the population.

A higher percentage of participants who attended public meetings in the suburbs – including the four public meetings held in Dublin, the South Side, Grove City and Westerville – chose “Make Better Connections” as one of their three most important values. Approximately 28% of participants in the suburban meetings voted for “Make Better Connections” compared to approximately 21% of participants across all public meetings. This likely speaks to the fact that transit in the suburbs is limited and intra-suburb travel remains difficult.

Another notable finding from the suburban meetings is that 21% of participants voted for “Focus the Growth,” while 17% of participants across all meetings voted for “Focus the Growth.” While not necessarily intuitive, this may mean that those living in the suburbs support focused and compact growth patterns that can be more easily connected by transit.

Facilitated Discussion

Equally important to the way people voted is their reasoning and thoughts behind their votes. After people participated in the structured exercise, the NextGen team facilitated a discussion about the choices people made and why they made them.

Make Better Connections – Extend transit’s reach deeper into the communities it already serves.

The goal “Make Better Connections” received the highest number of votes among the six goals presented. People talked about creating “better places” and the need for a variety of transportation infrastructure improvements, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike paths. They wanted to create places where people did not have to drive, could walk around safely, and use transit. This input suggests the importance of multimodal transportation systems.

Build on Success – Make existing transit service more compelling.

The notion that COTA should build on its success resonated strongly with meeting participants. The “Build on Success” goal received the second highest number of votes among everyone who participated in the exercise. To many this was a simple idea that needed more attention: if COTA is doing something that is working, they should do more of it. For many, this meant operating more CBUS-like neighborhood circulators in other parts of downtown Columbus and central Ohio. Participants also used this value to discuss implementing technology improvements, such as real time bus arrival information and improved fare collection systems, to enhance existing services.

Invest in Overlooked Communities – Direct investment to specific corridors and neighborhoods.

People across nearly all formats recognized that transit has the power to shape communities and encourage economic development. They felt that central Ohio overall needs a stronger, more comprehensive transit network. They expressed that overlooked communities – high-need areas with low income and limited transportation choices – would use new services more and have a bigger impact on their lives compared to those who have other transportation choices.

Many people also voted for this goal because it captured the idea that transit needs to play a role in equalizing access to jobs and opportunities.

Follow the Growth - Strengthen fast growing areas.

People said that the region needs faster, more efficient transit connections to fast-growing suburban housing and job centers where transit is lacking, such as Dublin, New Albany, Gahanna and Westerville. They tended to talk about rail service to and between these areas.

It is also worth noting that over time, people who participated in the outreach process lost enthusiasm for the way this value was articulated. Ultimately this goal was folded into a new refined goal, “Coordinate with Growth”.

Focus the Growth - Use new transit investments to attract and concentrate growth.

The “Focus the Growth” value was identified at the economic development professional workshop. This modified version of “Follow the Growth” aimed to capture that transit should be a key driver of future infill development, rather than simply following growth patterns that result in land-uses that are difficult to serve with transit. People who liked this value or goal expressed that transit can be a tool to help the region be successful. People felt strongly that the current development patterns are unsustainable. Many people also recognized that it is not cost effective for COTA to send buses everywhere but if we could create more densely populated areas, the region could serve them more efficiently and effectively. As the values were refined “Focus the Growth” was folded into a new value, “Coordinate with Growth”. This value was intended to capture sentiments express by those in favor of both “Follow the Growth” and “Focus the Growth”, by stating that successful transit can shape development but also must serve demand where it exists, and thus, must be coordinated with growth.

Save the Earth - Protect the environment and reduce greenhouse gases.

The “Save the Earth” goal received the lowest number of votes among the six goals presented. People talked about the role transit can play in protecting the environment by encouraging a car-free lifestyle and reducing air pollutants produced by cars. Participants noted that Columbus is a non-attainment area for federal air quality standards; by creating more viable transportation choices, transit could also support other regional goals.

Key Findings: Transit Needs and Gaps

Another goal of the meetings was to figure out where people felt there are gaps in the existing transit network and where service development would be needed in the future. As part of facilitating this conversation, the NextGen team walked the audience through how central Ohio is forecast to change. This information included future population and employment maps as well as maps that show future congestion on central Ohio's primary roadways. The NextGen team also presented different types of transit services and how community design and land uses relate to these transit services. The purpose behind this discussion was both to encourage the audience to think creatively about central Ohio's future and to consider how new and different types of public transportation could support their neighborhood.

At the end of the presentation, the NextGen team asked the audience for ideas about where future transit services should be developed. People were encouraged to think broadly and creatively to identify corridors and neighborhoods as well as places that need connections to other parts of the region.

Similar to the values exercise, the NextGen team prepared a structured exercise and facilitated a conversation to encourage people to identify transit service needs and new opportunities. The exercise involved identifying three places on a map of central Ohio where transit investment should be made (see Appendix B.3). People were allowed to draw on handouts and a poster in the back of the room.

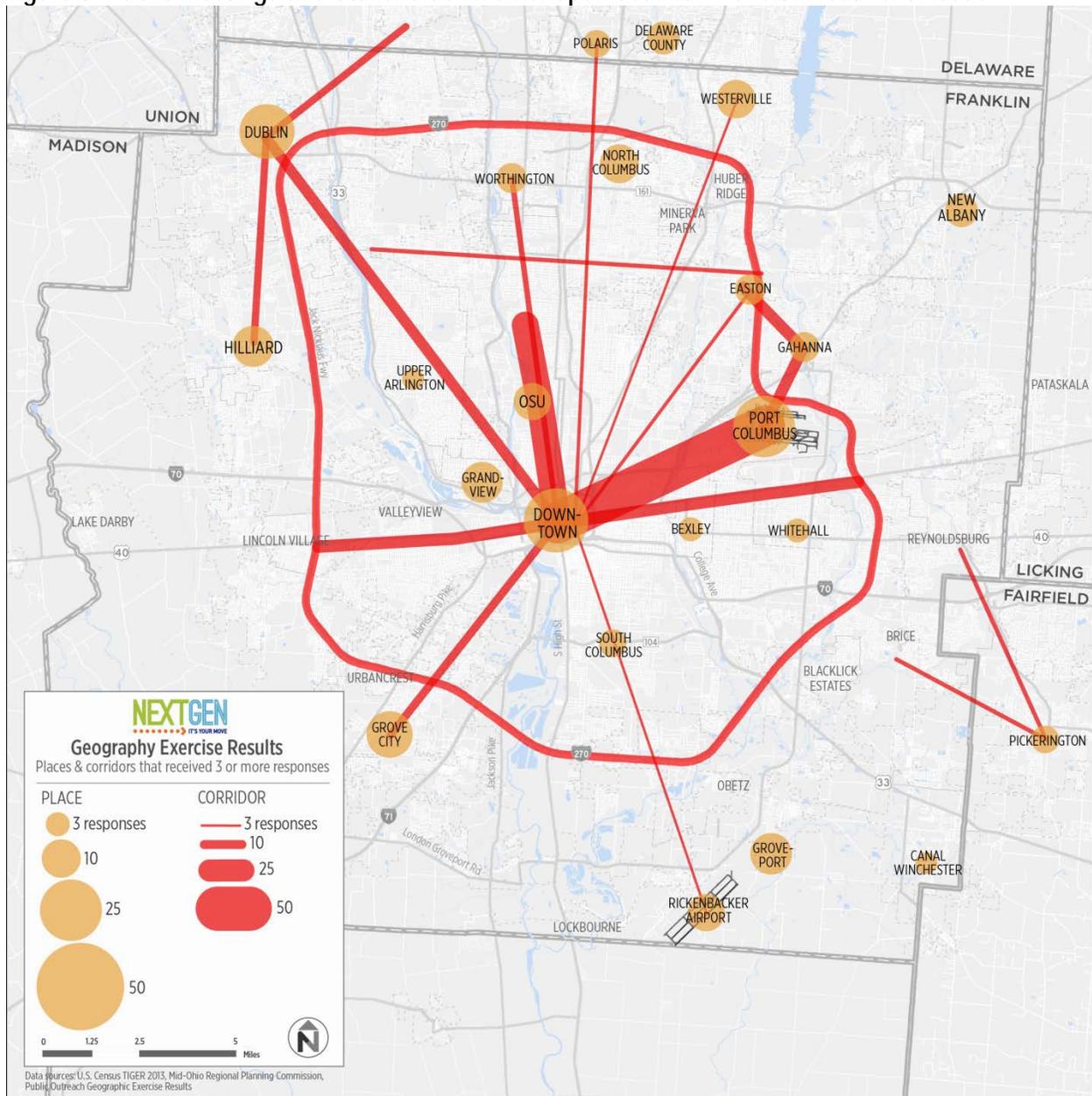
The exercise was "open," allowing people to draw or write wherever they thought transit service would be needed. As such, the responses were broadly ranged. However, four geographic areas were more consistently and frequently cited (see Figure 3):

- Downtown Columbus (62 responses) – High Street and Ohio State University
- Northern suburbs (123 responses) – Dublin, Worthington, Westerville, New Albany, Gahanna, Polaris, and Easton
 - Better connections to downtown
 - More connections between the individual communities
 - Service within the individual communities.
- Port Columbus International Airport (71 responses) – primarily between downtown Columbus and Port Columbus
- Downtown to Southern Suburbs (38 responses) (Grove City, Groveport)

Although not specifically asked, meeting participants also provided their input on the type of service central Ohio should invest:

- Light rail (17 responses)
- Commuter rail (15 responses)
- Bus rapid transit (11 responses)
- CBUS (9 responses)

Figure 3: Public Meetings and Stakeholder Workshops: Ideas for Transit Investment Needs



5 NON-TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Overview

The NextGen team organized several less-formal community outreach events designed to make it as easy and convenient as possible for people to learn about NextGen and provide input; and to create a broader level of awareness about the project.

These opportunities included two neighborhood sessions (also called “table events”) at Earth Day and the Cinco de Mayo Latino job fair; a transportation panel at a young professional conference; and a presentation to the Short North Alliance. Also included in this category is information collected through coordination with the Connect Columbus project and the NextGen web page.

The Short North Alliance presentation and the Young Professionals Conference allowed for detailed and nuanced discussions. Online materials gave people an opportunity to spend as long as they wanted with the project information and take as long as they wanted to provide comments. However, the table events and coordinated Connect Columbus outreach created superficial interactions. People typically stopped by a table or the Connect Columbus “Plan Van” for a handful of minutes, looked at materials, provided comments and continued on to other activities. This compares with public meetings and stakeholder workshops where people devoted one or two hours to learning about NextGen, weighing in on their values and priorities, and discussing needs.

Of the 500 people who participated in NextGen’s Phase 1 community engagement activities, over 150 of them interacted with the project at one of the neighborhood or presentation events.

Comments from Neighborhood Sessions and Presentations

Table Events and Short North Presentation

Votes for the transit values as part of these events followed the overall trends of other outreach activities, with some notable exceptions. At the Earth Day table event and the Short North presentation, people selected the “Build on Success” as the highest ranked goal, followed by “Invest in Overlooked Communities”. “Make Better Connections”, which had the most support in the outreach process as a whole, received the lowest number of votes. In addition, the “Save the Earth” goal received more votes as compared with the sample overall, potentially due to the fact they were collected at the Earth Day event. At the Cinco de Mayo job fair, both “Make Better Connections” and “Follow the Growth” received the highest number of votes, which is more in line with the overall sample.

In terms of the geographic needs, people filling out comment cards in the neighborhood sessions placed a lot of emphasis on service in downtown Columbus, citing projects such as light rail or CBUS service between downtown and OSU. These voters were also more likely to suggest service from downtown to the regional employment centers, including the Port Columbus Airport, Polaris, the outer belt area, and northeast Columbus. A handful of people also identified the need for service to southern Franklin County, including Grove City, Rickenbacker and Groveport.

Young Professional Conference

The transportation panel at the Young Professions (YP) Conference focused on the importance of transportation choices and transit to people's decisions about where to live and work. People in the YP conference also offered more futuristic ideas about transportation, such as connected car technology, real time information about congestion, and solar panel roads. When asked to vote for transit goals, the YP conference participants voted for "Focus the Growth", "Follow the Growth" and "Save the Earth" as the three most important goals. Of all the segments, the YP crowd was the least likely to identify "Build on Success" as an important goal to guide transit investment.

In terms of the geographic transit needs, young professionals were less focused on downtown service and more interested in connections and services to the outlying communities, especially the northern tier and southern community suburbs (Grove City, Groveport, Rickenbacker and southwest Columbus).

The YP conference participants expressed a lot of support for rail (light rail or streetcar), which was mentioned 18 times during the discussion by various participants. This compares with circulators, which were mentioned three times and BRT which was mentioned once throughout the course of the conversation. No other specific modes were mentioned

Comments Provided via Web

People who interacted with the NextGen study were always encouraged to go to the NextGen website (www.cota.com/nextgen). The team created an online version of the public meeting presentation and posted it to the webpage. The study team also prepared business cards to advertise the web site. These cards were distributed at the table events, meetings, and workshops as well as by the Connect Columbus team during their outreach. In total, the NextGen team received 68 online comments, including a handful of online comments submitted to the Connect Columbus web site related to transit.

More than half (48) of all comments expressed a desire for central Ohio (and COTA) to develop a light rail network. Many also had specific ideas for connections including between downtown Columbus and OSU (10); downtown and the airport (7); downtown, Polaris, and Delaware County (3); downtown and the employment warehouses in southern Franklin County (3), and downtown and Dublin (2).

A significant portion of the comments (9) reflected desires to have more transit service in general, including more service frequency, longer hours of service, and service on more days of the week.

Another significant portion of the comments (8) reflected interests in more and better fare and information systems. People who made these comments want higher quality technology and what they perceive as more modern ways to pay their fares, learn about the available services,

and generally make the system easier to use. Specifically, suggestions were made for cashless fare payment (credit/debit payment, mobile phone payment, or reloadable smart cards), real time arrival information (through mobile apps and posted at stops), and easier-to-use online route and schedule information.

Connect Columbus

The Columbus Multimodal Thoroughfare Plan (branded as Connect Columbus) is a comprehensive multimodal transportation plan being conducted for the City of Columbus. This planning effort is simultaneous with NextGen and in some cases, staff from the NextGen team participated in the Connect Columbus outreach efforts to help widen the reach of the NextGen study. Members of the NextGen study team working on both projects participated in the “Plan Van”, a mobile outreach resource that traveled to park and ride lots to talk to commuters about their transportation needs. Many of the people who participated in Connect Columbus events wanted to talk transit. As a result, while people did not participate in the specific exercises crafted for the NextGen effort, they did provide general comments about central Ohio’s future transit needs.

In total, the team collected more than 130 comments about central Ohio’s transit service development. The NextGen team reviewed these comments and broadly classified them into the following comments types:

- More and better transit service (44%):
 - Increase service frequency and service hours
 - Reduce the need for transfers.
 - Improve service to the suburbs
 - Last mile connections so people could get to work
- Rail (29%)
 - Light rail system
 - Between downtown and the suburbs
 - Between downtown and the airport
 - Streetcar system in downtown
 - Regional rail network, with service to Chicago and Cincinnati
- Support for COTA’s service in general, particularly CBUS (<5%)
- Information technology (<5%)
 - Fare collection system
 - Real-time passenger information
 - More and better bus apps
 - Technologically advanced fare payment systems
- Bus facilities (<5%)
 - More and better bus stops
 - Integration with the bike network.