

Busline

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A photograph of two men in business suits standing in front of a white Jefferson Transit bus. The bus has 'JEFFERSON TRANSIT' written on the destination sign and 'J225' on the side. The man on the left is wearing a dark suit and a patterned tie, while the man on the right is wearing a brown suit and a yellow tie. The background shows a clear blue sky with some clouds.

Jefferson Transit Revitalizing The Public Transit System After Katrina

David Thomas Tours

Steady & Planned Growth Pays Off

Vehicle Showcase:

Small & Midsize Buses

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Busline Magazine
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After Aug. 29, 2005, many people in the New Orleans, LA, area now reckon time in pre-Katrina and post-Katrina terms. Hurricane Katrina was the costliest and one of the deadliest hurricanes in American history, and it nearly hit New Orleans head-on, passing just east of the city. In addition to wind damage, 80 percent of New Orleans, and many areas in nearby parishes, were flooded for weeks.

As the two-year anniversary of the storm approaches this summer, the area is slowly but surely recovering from the devastation wrought by Katrina.

One area which has been recovering more quickly than many others is Jefferson Parish, which includes most of the suburbs of New Orleans. Playing an integral role in the rich heritage of the parish is its public transit system, Jefferson Transit, which is also on the rebound following Katrina.

“We had to shut it down,” Terry McCarthy, Jefferson Parish director of citizens’ affairs, said of the transit system in the wake of Katrina. “We didn’t lose any equipment. We lost a few fences, shingles, maybe a couple of gates, but we did not receive any extensive damage.”

Jefferson Parish straddles the Mississippi River, and during Katrina, the west bank did not sustain as much damage as the east bank. About 35 percent of the east bank area was under water following the storm, McCarthy said.

“Public transportation in the areas not affected by flooding was restored within about a month and a half,” he said.

Even though Jefferson Transit’s equipment sustained minimal damage, many of its employees lost their homes, and temporarily their jobs, as the system had to cut its service by 60 percent.

“We have a large number of employees still on furlough,” said Derrick E. Breun, general manager for Veolia, a French-based transportation company, one of the largest in the world, which operates the transit system for the Jefferson Parish Council.

“A large number of our employees did lose homes. We provided travel trailers for them to live on Jefferson Transit property until other options were found,” Breun said. “Veolia, to its credit, did a good job of keeping folks on the payroll for as long as it could, and helping folks as much as it could.”

East Bank — West Bank

Traditionally, Jefferson Transit has been spoken of, and operated in two parts — the “east bank” (of the Mississippi River) and the “west bank.”

The transit company began in 1931 on the east bank, with what was then called the Kenner local route, which transported railroad workers by streetcar to and from New Orleans to the suburb of Kenner.

Over the years, the east bank system grew from a single streetcar line to a six-route transit system. Prior to local subsidy, providing charters was a successful sideline, which included transporting National Football League teams from Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport, located in Kenner, downtown to the Louisiana Superdome.

Service began on the west bank in 1949, where there has been as many as 12 routes over the years. Until a little more than a year ago, the west bank service and the east bank service were operated by separate companies in Jefferson Parish.

“For many, many years we had two providers, but that has not proved to be a good business decision in recent times,” McCarthy said. “When the parish was smaller, it probably was a good business decision, but as the transit systems grew, the parish had to deal with two companies, which also meant dealing with two unions.”

To rectify the situation, the Jefferson Parish Council, under the leadership of President Aaron F. Broussard, decided to operate the transit system with one provider. A little more than a year ago, Veolia took over the operation of both the east bank and the west bank. Just prior to Katrina, Veolia purchased the large, nationwide transportation company ATC, which operated the west bank service. Veolia was subsequently awarded the contract for the east bank service, taking it over from Louisiana Transit on April 1, 2006.

Along with the change to Veolia, a new leadership team was formed that includes McCarthy and Ryan D. Brown, coordinator of transit administration, who both work for Jefferson Parish, and Breun of Veolia.

While Jefferson Transit buses and facilities are owned by the parish, Veolia is responsible for the daily operation of the system. Veolia employs, and is responsible for, all the operators, dispatchers and supervisors for the system.

The council has also considered post-Katrina realities — pre-Katrina ridership was 4.5 million passengers per year, compared to post-Katrina ridership of 1.8 million passengers per year — and has implemented changes to revitalize the public transit system.

“The council decided to take a look at all the routes. At one time we had about 15 or 16 routes. After we took a deep breath, we became much more fiscally responsible, and whittled it down to 9 routes,” McCarthy said.

The evidence seems to indicate the new strategies and the new leadership team are paying off, as the transit has added a new route since January, making it 10, and ridership and services are steadily increasing.

According to Brown, the transit company will add an additional 10,000 hours of service this year, and another additional 10,000 hours of service in 2008.

Currently Jefferson Transit operates 32, fixed-route buses, 4 of which have been added since January, Breun said.

“We are operating under a new business model, and the good news is, it is working very well,” McCarthy said. “One of the things I feel is critical throughout the entire process, is that we approach it as a team. We (McCarthy, Breun and Brown) all agree we want to make things happen for the betterment of our parish.”

Riding The Storm Out, And Beyond

Katrina began as a tropical storm, forming over the Bahamas on Aug. 23, 2005. As it approached the Florida coast, it intensified to hurricane strength and made landfall near the Miami-Dade-Broward county line on Aug. 25, as a moderate Category 1 storm.

After crossing the Florida peninsula and moving into the Gulf of Mexico, the storm regained strength, as the National Hurricane Center had predicted. On the morning of Aug. 26, Katrina had grown to a Category 3 storm. The NHC had predicted the storm would turn north toward the Florida Panhandle, but by the afternoon of Aug. 26, it was evident the storm was not going to turn. The next morning, Aug. 27, the NHC issued a hurricane watch for Southeastern Louisiana that included New Orleans.

Also, early on the morning of Aug. 27, Jefferson Parish emergency managers declared a state of emergency. By 9 a.m., the Jefferson Parish Emergency Operating Center had been fully activated.

As the massive storm bore down on the New Orleans area, it was upgraded to a Category 5 hurricane. On the morning of Aug. 28, shortly after Katrina was upgraded to a Category 5 storm, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin ordered the evacuation of the city, and established several “shelters of last resort” for people who could not leave the city — of which the most well-known nationwide was the Superdome.

Jefferson Transit was called into action to help ferry people out of harm’s way.

“We were part of the emergency operations for the parish to help those folks without any transportation find a way out.” McCarthy said.

On the morning of Aug. 29, Katrina roared ashore as a Category 3 hurricane. It has since been declared the most costly and destructive natural disaster in American history, doing an estimated \$81.2 billion (2005 U.S. dollars) in damage, and killing 1,836 people.

Breun recalled Jefferson Transit’s role before and after Katrina.

“As the storm was coming down the pipe, the parish was requesting services to transport people to shelters of last resort,” Breun said.

In addition to aiding in the operation to take citizens to refuge locations, Jefferson Transit also had to transport its vehicles to higher ground, as much of the New Orleans area is below sea level.

Immediately following the storm, and amid the mind-boggling devastation, Jefferson Transit buses again were called upon to aid in evacuating citizens from the flooded city.

“We brought back some buses and joined the rescue effort,” Breun said. “Right after the storm, people were being taken by helicopter to the causeway and the interstate, where buses would pick them up to take them to the airport.”

Jefferson Transit also had the daunting task of trying to locate its employees, many of whom had lost their homes, and were relocated to other states including Arizona, Texas and Wisconsin, to name a few.

“Post storm, we had to find where our people were, and make sure they were paid for services which they had provided,” Breun said. “That was a difficult task.”

Breun praised Veolia for doing a good job in finding and helping Jefferson Transit employees.

Breun also praised the parish’s paratransit operation for its response during the storm crisis. The Mobility Impaired Transit System (MITS) is operated by East Jefferson General Hospital. MITS is under Jefferson Transit administration, which also provides the vehicles.

“East Jefferson General Hospital did a miraculous job,” Breun said. “I think they transported between 1,000 and 2,000 folks, in about 16 paratransit vehicles, who couldn’t get out of harm’s way on their own because of medical reasons.”

On The Road To Recovery

According to the Louisiana Recovery Authority, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed more than 200,000 homes and 18,000 businesses in Southern Louisiana.

Hurricane Rita followed Katrina nearly a month later, making landfall on Sept. 24, 2005, near the Texas-Louisiana border as a Category 3 storm.

The road to recovery for Jefferson Parish has been swifter than its devastated neighbor, Orleans Parish, at least in terms of returning population.

A study released by the LRC, done in conjunction with the U.S. Census Bureau, estimates Jefferson Parish had a population of 435,786 residents as of August 2006, as compared to a population of 452,824 residents just prior to Katrina, in July 2005.

The study estimates Orleans Parish had a population of 187,525 residents in August 2006, compared to 454,863 in July 2005.

According to Brown, part of the reason Jefferson Parish's population has recovered to near pre-Katrina levels is because many people who lived in New Orleans, but who are unable to return there because of a lack of housing and services, are relocating to Jefferson Parish to be near the city.

"The west bank is actually undergoing a lot of 'urban sprawl' right now," Brown said. "We are almost back to the numbers we had before Katrina."

The influx of people into Jefferson Parish has boded well for the transit system, as more people means more bus riders, which has led to an increase in services.

"We are running 45 percent of the service we did before the storm, but that is growing," Breun said.

Increases in services and ridership also bodes well for Jefferson Transit employees waiting to come home and return to work.

"Because of the new services we are bringing on line, we have one person who has returned from Phoenix (AZ), and another person who has returned from Dallas (TX)," Breun said. "Employees are still struggling to find good housing. Some folks lived in rentals, and the rental market has not come back to pre-Katrina levels.

"We deal with these and other storm-related issues on a daily basis. We are working hard to make sure we have the equipment and the right folks in place to add to these services."

In addition to the administrative staff of McCarthy, Breun and Brown, Jefferson Transit has 49 operators (bus drivers), of which 6 have been added since January; 6 supervisors; 11 mechanics and shop personnel; 9 front office staffers, 20 MITS operators; 8 MITS dispatchers; and 4 MITS front office staffers.

"Employees want to come back. It is a good place to work. It is a good job," Breun said.

"Our people who were in the storm, showed great courage and character. They were willing to step in and help out the system.

"They care a lot about the transit system, and about the people they serve. They really go out of their way for the folks on the street.

"As a transit operator, there can't be anything more important than caring for the person you are picking up every day."

Not Your Daddy's Transit System

Even as Jefferson Transit is slowly, but surely gaining ridership and expanding services, it seems evident that whatever the future brings, the transit system will not mirror its former self.

Much depends on the shape and scope of recovery in New Orleans. Will the old neighborhoods be rebuilt as they were before Katrina? Will the people who return there be those who are dependent upon public transportation? Will the neighborhoods be rebuilt with more upper-scale housing and populated by people who are less likely to depend on public transportation? Will the businesses return? Will the health care centers return? These and many other questions are yet to be fully answered.

“It is so much different now than it was before the storm,” Breun said. “Our strongest bus lines then are not our strongest lines now, and those lines that were a little weaker are now our strongest.”

Breun tells of transit officials noticing a large increase in ridership on one local route, because passengers who would have normally travelled to a hospital in New Orleans are now going to the closest available hospital located on the outskirts of the city.

“Many services that were provided in Orleans Parish are no longer available, including health care facilities,” Breun said.

Before Katrina, Jefferson Transit operated routes to and from major health care facilities in New Orleans, including Charity Hospital and Tulane University Hospital and Clinic, and also traveled to and from Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport to the central business district in New Orleans. These were the transit system’s two biggest routes in terms of ridership.

For a period of time following Katrina, Tulane University Hospital and Clinic was closed, and Charity Hospital remains closed. Also, the airport run is not back to full strength. As a result of changing route dynamics, Jefferson Transit is making adjustments, and so are its riders.

“Hopefully, we will bring back some of those riders,” Breun said.

One plus on the ridership front has been the large influx of Hispanics to the area, who came post Katrina seeking jobs in the recovery effort.

To promote transit growth, the parish is undertaking two interrelated projects.

“One of the things the parish is doing is planning to build a bus terminal on the east bank. It will be the first bus terminal on the east bank in the transit’s history,” Breun said.

There are currently two bus terminals on the west bank that have been successful in attracting “choice riders” — riders who take the bus by choice, and not because it is their only transportation option.

“The west bank terminals afforded folks the opportunity to leave their cars and take the bus to the central business district,” Breun said. “We think a new terminal on the east bank will accomplish the same thing.

“That may start a trend toward people deciding they don’t have to drive to the central business district, fight traffic, and pay for parking, they can just catch the bus and let someone else deal with the traffic.”

A new terminal in the east bank area will also compliment the parish’s ongoing project to improve the Airline Drive corridor.

“The terminal will be one additional piece to the puzzle,” Breun said.

Funding Is The Key To The Highway

One of the biggest issues facing Jefferson Transit, and public transportation in general, is funding, according to Breun.

Brown agrees with Breun: “One of the big challenges for public transit is always going to be funding. So we are writing and looking for grant money right now to meet that challenge.”

The federal government has allowed the transit system to use preventative maintenance funds for operations through 2008, and hopefully beyond, Breun said.

"Fares are a significant slice of our revenue pie, and the storm hurt us in that area," Breun said. "As we increase services, we will see an increase in ridership. So, we are back on the right track."

Breun said it is hoped the federal government will fund the transit system based on potential ridership, and not solely on current ridership numbers.

"The New Orleans area is short roughly 200,000 people. The city, in large part, was a transit-dependent area, so ridership was there," Breun said. "So, we are hoping they will put the horse before the cart, and make sure to fund us at a level where we can continue to expand and provide transit services as the area recovers."

Breun sees housing as a parallel issue — no adequate housing, no people to ride the bus.

Technology Aids Transit Operations

Modern technologies, including automatic vehicle location (AVL), global positioning (GPS), and video systems, as well as the Internet, are important tools Jefferson Transit uses to better serve its riders.

The AVL and GPS systems allow for the real-time monitoring of buses which provides transit authorities with information used in making decisions, such as when to increase service in a particular location, Breun said.

Also by knowing where buses are located throughout the system, information can be immediately available to riders who may phone inquiring about the status, or waiting time for a bus.

"Old school was you would look at a schedule and make an estimation whether or not a rider had perhaps missed a bus, and might have to wait for the next one," Breun said.

With the positioning systems, information concerning the exact whereabouts of a bus can be given to a rider, so he/she will know for sure how much longer to wait.

Jefferson Transit's camera system is valuable as a security measure. Although criminal activities, such as assaults and thefts, are rare throughout the system, they do occur, Breun said. Using the camera system, Jefferson Transit has been able to help police catch some offenders.

With the Internet, Jefferson Transit is able to keep riders up-to-date on transit news.

"We have the route schedules on the Internet," Brown said. "If anything is going on, such as a change in schedule, we are able to keep our riders informed."

Also on the transit's Web site, www.jeffersontransit.org, riders can offer feedback.

"Riders can communicate with us, and let us know what is on their minds," Brown said. "That has been very helpful."

Looking to the future, Jefferson Transit is exploring the idea of using hybrid vehicles in its fleet.

"We are currently doing research on how we might use hybrid electric vehicles," Brown said.

On The Future Of Bus Travel In Jefferson Parish And Nationwide

In the short term, the future of Jefferson Transit must be looked at through the lens of a post-Katrina world.

Breun has mixed emotions in speaking of the future.

"It is sort of tough to look at the system as it was before Katrina, and then look at it today," he said. "The good news is, we have nowhere to go but up. As the city of New Orleans comes back, we will come back, and we will provide a good service for the area."

Brown predicts the area will garner more support from government sources in its recovery efforts.

"I believe we will get bigger and bigger in the Washington, D.C., spotlight," he said. "I believe we will receive greater funding for our transit, and as a result, we will be able to help a lot of people. We are looking forward to that."

Brown, who has a background in marketing, is working on several ways to increase ridership and awareness as the transit system continues to prepare for the future.

He is working with senior citizen homes and groups to educate seniors about bus services and schedules. Plans for special runs to periodically take seniors to a shopping center, for example, are in the works.

Under Brown's direction, Jefferson Transit is also working with church groups to educate people about schedules and programs to encourage bus ridership.

Other ideas are also being explored, such as establishing a rider appreciation day or week.

"We are trying to do some innovative things to better serve our customers," Brown said.

Programs to more fully understand and meet the needs of the individual rider are also being planned.

"We are looking at having six of our drivers conduct passenger surveys. With the information we gain from the surveys, we will be able to do a better job in determining a rider's needs," Brown said.

He added that administrators occasionally ride a bus and talk to people to gain first-hand knowledge about what riders think of the transit system.

"We get a lot of good feedback," Brown said, adding he recently met a woman who has been walking two miles a day for 14 years to ride the bus.

"She knows more about transit than I can even imagine," Brown said. "For some people, public transit is a very important part of their lives. You meet people who care as much about transit as they do their own homes."

Even in urban areas, where many people rely on public transit, America's love affair with the automobile is a major factor in limiting the growth of public transportation, as opposed to other parts of the world, such as in Europe, where public transportation is much more widespread.

"I guess people just love their privacy, even with the high gas prices," Brown said.

Some people's image of public transportation, and the lack of government funding are also factors which can limit growth and widespread acceptance.

In order to attract "choice riders," Brown and Breun said a strong, effective marketing scheme can be the answer.

"Other industries have done it. The milk industry, for example, has taken a beating in the past, but has revitalized itself by using some great marketing strategies," Breun said.

He added that one possible scenario might be that as baby boomers get older and are less inclined to drive, they might have the clout to pressure governmental entities to fund public transit in smaller communities that have not traditionally been transit-dependent.

"I think we are going to have to develop a solid marketing scheme to make our lawmakers at the federal, state and local levels realize how important transit is to their citizens," Brown said.

In that vein, Breun complimented the Jefferson Parish Council for its commitment to the transit system.

"I must say, it is pleasant to have a group of leaders, including the parish president, who understand transit," he said.

The Most Precious Cargo

Most people would agree that one ingredient in living a happy life is having a job one enjoys.

Such is the case for veteran Jefferson Transit bus drivers Frank White Jr. and Sidney Joseph Sr.

"Once I heard my daddy say, 'If you find something that you like to do, you don't have to go to work,'" White said. "I have been a bus operator for nearly 40 years and I like what I do. I take my job seriously."

Joseph, who has been an operator for 24 years, echoed White's remarks: "I enjoy my job. First and foremost, I feel like I am handling the most precious cargo in the world — human life.

"There hasn't been a day since I have been an operator that I have felt like I did not want to go to work, and I say that wholeheartedly."

Both men agree that to be a successful bus driver, much patience is needed.

"You have to learn to be patient with people," White said. "Not everyone can be treated the same. I find that to be a good operator, patience pays off better than anything else."

For some people who ride the bus, the driver is someone they feel they can confide in, someone they can trust.

"A pleasant disposition and a good attitude are important," Joseph said. "For some people who board the bus, it is not just a ride to and from work, sometimes they want to bend your ear a little bit, they want someone to talk to."

In their daily interaction with the public over the years, both men have had a front row seat to many changes that have occurred in the New Orleans area, and in society as a whole. White and Joseph have changed, too.

"I have changed since I started. Maybe the job was the same then, but I wasn't the same," White said. "I think a man shouldn't be the same as when he started. I want to grow every day. I want to be better today than I was yesterday."

Hurricane Katrina was one such event the men lived through that had an impact on their personal and working lives.

"Hurricane Katrina definitely impacted my life and my job," Joseph said. "I feel a lot more humble toward people, because there are people who ride the bus now, who were not transit-dependent before the storm.

"Since the storm, I think people are a lot more compassionate. We just hope things can continue to progress, that transit can continue to move forward, and everybody can benefit from the public transportation system."

Breun praised both men for having been recognized by the National Safety Council.

“These are two of our safest drivers. Everyday they go out there and do a great job,” he said.

And indeed, both men said they live by the credo “safety first.” Making sure their “precious cargo” arrives safely requires constant vigilance.

“When I get ready to hit my brakes, I have to look up, down and around. It is important to make sure no one is standing up in the bus, and no cars are right behind me. I sometimes have only a fraction of a second to make a major life decision,” Joseph said.

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Jefferson Transit representatives include, left to right, Veolia general manager Derrick Breun, Wade Evans, Karen Longworth, Frank White, Sidney Joseph, Michael Stewart, Donald Williams, Eric Weissborn, Joel Morris, Orlandez Pierre, and coordinator of transit administration Ryan Brown.