

Holiday Ride



Mayor Kay Barnes waves as she boards The Metro's specially decorated "Peace On Earth" bus following the Crown Center lighting ceremony Nov. 29.



Raising Awareness



Kansas City's Disability Awareness Day this fall had a little national flavor, as some high school juniors from the Atlanta area saw life from a different perspective during the seventh annual event. The Cumberland Christian Academy students, on a school-sponsored trip to the area, requested to participate in the activity, which the ATA and Kansas City, Mo., Mayor's Office on Disabilities co-sponsored. The students and other special guests were asked to simulate a disability, then were paired with someone who actually has the disability. The pairs followed a script requiring them to perform various tasks – obtaining a change of address card, for example – while riding The Metro. For Cumberland students Rachel Baklini (left) and Stacy Kreckler, boarding and riding the bus proves to be the easy part. The problems between the bus stops include opening doors without automatic push-buttons and crosswalks with construction-related obstacles that often blocked curb cuts.

Next Stop

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Innovative MetroCenter Opens For Business

Wayne Crompton, executive director of the KCMC Child Development Corporation, likes to tell other child care professionals from other cities all about the brand new 39th and Troost MetroCenter.

"They look at me stunned and ask, 'The public transit agency is taking a lead role in providing child care?'" said Crompton, during the MetroCenter's Nov. 14 dedication ceremony.

He paused, then added, "The transit authority where I come from is."

The ATA opened the unique two-in-one MetroCenter in mid-November. It houses both a comfortable transit waiting room and the 15,000-square foot Metro Early Learning Center. KCMC, Greater Kansas City's largest non-profit child care provider, operates the learning center, which accommodates more than 100 children, ranging from six weeks to five years old.

"The Metro Early Learning Center is a place where KCMC is helping some of The Metro's youngest customers literally get a 'Head Start,'" said ATA General Manager Mark Huffer.

He called the journey from the project's concep-



The new MetroCenter is located where two of the busiest Metro routes, the #25-Troost and #39-39th Street, meet. Combined, more than 11,000 trips are made on the two routes each week-day. (Above) Honored guests during the center's official dedication connect two banners symbolizing the partnership between the ATA and KCMC Child Development Corporation.

tion to its dedication a "long one made smooth through exceptional cooperation," between federal and Kansas City, Mo., officials, as well as various neighborhood associations and private foundations.

United States Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond and Rep. Karen McCarthy secured federal grants for construction. The Hall Family and George K. Baum Family foundations made the donations nec-

◆ See **METROCENTER** Inside

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INSIDE: More funding needed to avert severe service cuts

◆ METROCENTER

essary to complete the learning center's interior.

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) played a critical role throughout the entire process, according to ATA Project Management Director Jim Pritchett.

Personnel from the local FTA office reviewed the initial "basic plan," he said, and assisted the Authority in developing the dual project in compliance with federal guidelines.

"The FTA staff was proactive, helping us every step of the way," Pritchett said.

He explained the project had an obvious revitalization impact on a "blighted area." Linking child care and transit service significantly influenced FTA's approval of the plan "to improve safety and convenience for transit customers." How quickly the various neighborhood associations embraced the concept also greatly impressed FTA officials.

"Transit and child care are a perfect fit," said Troost Corridor Community Association Executive Director Charles Monroe. "There is a lot of bus traffic in that area, and there is a need for more child care. This facility doesn't just change the problem; it creates solutions."

Crompton praised the ATA for taking a lead role in addressing what he called "the child care problem."

"For many years, child care professionals, community, social and political activists, have struggled with a hard problem," he said. "How do we give access to quality child care to parents who use mass transportation to travel to and from work?"

"This project addresses that problem in an innovative and surprising way."

Kansas City, Mo., Director of City Planning and Development Vicki Noteis observed that the center represented the FOCUS KC plan being put in action. She cited a passage from the plan that described a person riding a bus and making one stop for child care and to run errands, such as stopping at the dry cleaners.

The MetroCenter is directly across the street from a dry cleaner.

There is a "natural link" between transit and child care, Pritchett said, adding, "I know this facility is going to make life easier for Metro customers. They can get inside while waiting for their buses and make one less stop to get their child excellent developmental care."

Ila Eaves is among the first Metro customers to use the Early Learning Center. She rides the #25-Troost to work and now leaves her 2-year-old daughter at the center.

'Signs Of Change' Take Center Stage

In 1972, ATA bus service underwent a multi-year transformation, starting with a new name – The Metro – and a new bus paint scheme, a single blue stripe on a white bus.

Now, exactly 30 years later, another Metro renewal process, Operation: Welcome Aboard, is in full swing.

Thirty-four new buses have rolled out, sporting the new blue, teal and silver lines, with the rest of the fleet to follow.

The most visible changes will be new signage and refurbished shelters. New Metro bus stop signs are being installed that provide more detailed route information.

The first of the new Metro Stop signs to be installed was unveiled at 63rd and Troost in October.

"It is literally

a sign of change," said Huffer.

Despite the ATA's budget concerns, replacing all 6,000 Metro Stop signs remains a priority for the agency.

"Our stops are where our customers start their trips on The Metro," ATA Marketing Director Cynthia Baker said. "Making the stops more inviting plays a vital role in retaining current customers and attracting new ones."



ATA General Manager Mark Huffer joins long-time Metro customer Tracey Myers in unveiling the new Metro Stop sign at 63rd and Troost.

"It's very convenient," Eaves told *The Kansas City Star*. "And it's on one of the main bus routes."

The dedication was held one year and five days after the official groundbreaking marked the start of construction. A local architectural firm, Gould Evans Goodman Associates, designed the facility. KC Heritage Construction Company transformed the blueprint into reality.

The \$4 million MetroCenter was completed on budget and ahead of schedule.

'Pivotal Year' Ahead For Transportation



Beneath one of the larger headlines in the Nov. 21 *Kansas City Star* was a sub-head that explained ATA's financial forecast: "Budget crunch looms in 2004 unless new funding is found."

That is why ATA General Manager Mark Huffer stresses that "2003 is a pivotal year" for public transportation in Greater Kansas City. A more substantial and stable funding

mechanism must be adopted, he said, to avoid deep cuts in Metro bus service. A reduction in service in 2004 could exceed 20 percent.

The outlook for 2003, meanwhile, is far from certain.

In drafting a 2003 budget, the ATA deployed what Huffer describes as "stop gap measures." Funds for capital projects have been diverted to cover operational costs, vacant positions will remain unfilled, and a wage and salary freeze has been budgeted.

The result is a budget that has a "delicate" balance, which a stormy winter or an economy that slumps further could disrupt.

"I have confidence in our professional staff to operate within the confines of this tight budget, but we have no room for the unforeseen, such as the costs of a three-day

blizzard," Huffer said during the ATA Board of Commissioners' meeting Nov. 20. "We could have to revisit this budget in mid-2003 and be forced to make cuts then."

A 65 percent cut in funding from the state of Missouri – from \$2.4 million annually to less than \$850,000 – coupled with declining revenue growth from a half-cent Kansas City, Mo., sales tax has put a tight squeeze on the Authority's budget. Federal grants, which enabled the agency to increase service in 1999 and 2000, have also expired, and farebox revenue has dipped as the unemployment rate has risen. Combined, those factors amount to a \$10 million drop in ATA funding.

"We have a total operating budget of just over \$50 million, about half that of our peer cities," Huffer pointed out.

The Kansas City area spends \$33 per person for transit each year, compared with \$73 to \$169 a person in Dallas, Denver, Minneapolis-St. Paul and St. Louis.

Most metropolitan areas implement county or regional taxes to adequately fund transportation, whereas the only dedicated source of revenue for transit in this region is a half-cent sales levied in the City of Kansas City, Mo., only.

We have a total operating budget of just over \$50 million, about half that of our peer cities.

Organization Reasserts Its Stance Favoring Regional Transit System

Public transportation has maintained a high position on the League of Women Voters' priority list for a long time.

In 1974, the League's local chapters issued their first policy statement endorsing a regional approach to transit in Greater Kansas City. This fall, those chapters' members reasserted their position. They recently hosted a forum to discuss "Smart Moves," a regional transit plan the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) and ATA are coordinating.

The League supports public transit to combat air pollution, conserve natural resources and serve as a crucial link to employment and housing, stated League member Delores Furtado, a Johnson County (Kan.) commissioner.

"Public transit helps people be more self-sufficient," she said. "We also see a need for more public transit to lessen congestion and to relieve people's dependence on the car."

MARC Director of Transportation Mell Henderson explained that "Smart Moves" would double transit service in the area and, in turn, double the number of people who have access to public transportation. The plan calls for developing an extensive bus system throughout the metropolitan region.

"With the economic development outward, it's imperative that our transit system expand to all corners of the

region," said ATA Planner/Special Services Director Mark Swope.

There is a clear demand for more transit among area residents, according to ATA Commissioner Irene French, who served on a "reaction panel" during the League's forum.

"Every survey we've conducted – MARC and the ATA – shows people want better transit service here," she said.

French fears that, if Greater Kansas City fails to act soon to develop a regional transit system, increasing traffic build-up will lower the region's quality of life and slow economic growth.



IRENE FRENCH