

The ZLine: Planning Transportation Collaboratively to Close Employment Access Gaps in Trenton, New Jersey



Background

Located in the heart of New Jersey, Mercer County is home to the state capital, and is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. Despite the prevalence of high-income households, there are significant income disparities within the county that correspond with differences in access to employment. The ZLine Shuttle Bus, a free service provided by the Greater Mercer Transportation Management Association (GMTMA) and Amazon, addresses some of these disparities by increasing job access for some of Mercer County's poorest residents. We sat down with the Executive Director of the GMTMA, Cheryl Kastrenakes, to learn more about the planning and implementation of the ZLine.

Associated Gaps and Bridges:

Gaps:

- Transfers between transportation modes are not always accessible, affordable, or intuitive.
- Existing routes and schedules are not always coordinated, flexible, or convenient.

Bridges:

- Encourage planning efforts and develop partnerships that provide service enhancements and access to living-wage jobs in difficult-to-reach locations.
- Transit service changes that provide new ways for vulnerable populations to access essential services, employment, and last-mile connections.

In 2012, Cheryl Kastrenakes learned that businesses located in the Matrix Business Park in Robbinsville, New Jersey, were having issues filling available positions. At the time, the Business Park was home to Green Mountain Coffee and several other light industrial businesses. Unemployment rates were still high following the recession, and many local people were in need of jobs. However, the business park was about five miles away from the nearest transit lines, inhibiting access for potential employees without reliable transportation by car. To help resolve this issue, GMTMA developed a partnership with the Chamber of Commerce, the town of Robbinsville, Rise (a social service provider), and Mercer County Community College, among other partners, and obtained a technical assistance grant from the Community Transportation Association of America to address job access issues. They attended a training event in Washington, DC, and there brainstormed the first ideas behind what would become the ZLine.

Process and Implementation

In 2013, Amazon announced that it would be moving 2,000 jobs to the Matrix Business Park. Amazon's arrival helped move the project forward by providing the additional funding necessary to launch the shuttle, while also providing the project a sense of urgency. It was imperative the ZLine be ready to operate by the time the new Amazon warehouse and fulfillment center opened. "It's easiest to get people to make a change in how they do things when it's new," explains Kastrenakes. An important step in the planning process was reaching out to the other companies in the Matrix Business Park. The aforementioned partnership met with human resource representatives from the 13 participating companies and gathered data like shift times and policies on mandatory overtime to ensure that a shuttle could be scheduled at convenient times. They also reached out to New Jersey Transit to ensure that the ZLine would be connected to existing transit, both in terms of location and timing, to broaden its reach and utility. New Jersey Transit adjusted its bus schedules to coordinate with the ZLine. Through the community college, the partnership was also able to survey non-traditional students and residents about their transportation needs.

Following a year and a half of coordination and data collection, the partnership secured New Jersey Job Access Reverse Commute funding, and the ZLine was launched in 2014 along with the opening of the Amazon facility. The ZLine runs a 4.2-mile route between Hamilton Marketplace and the Matrix Business Park, bridging the gap between four bus lines and the business center, and connecting residents from Trenton, Hightstown, and East Windsor to job opportunities. After its launch, ZLine ridership surveys were conducted, which found that 89 percent of riders reported a household income of less than \$35,000 and 37 percent reported less than \$15,000. Additionally, 41 percent of riders reported that they would not have been able to make the trip to the Matrix Business Park without the shuttle, and 74 percent reported that they did not have a car to make the trip. In its first year, the ZLine amassed 98,000 total rides.

Lessons Learned

One of the biggest obstacles in the process of creating the ZLine was overcoming skepticism from local stakeholders because of a previous failed shuttle project. Kastrenakes suspects that the project's failure was due to poor design, and neglecting to design for the passengers. "You can't just put a bus out and say, 'Well, there's a bus there and it gets there at 7,' when their shift starts at 7," she says. The partnership overcame this obstacle by working with employees and employers to ensure that the service would meet the needs of as many potential riders as possible. Another challenge faced by the partnership was getting the necessary buy-in from businesses in the business park. Although all of the Human Resources representatives saw the need for, and were in favor of, funding the shuttle, not all were able to convince those making budget decisions to support it. Despite this hurdle, Cheryl remains hopeful that the companies who chose not to participate might see the benefit the shuttle is providing to other users, and decide to join at a later date. Kastrenakes emphasized the need for new shuttle providers to really believe in their service, because certainty will prompt others to join the partnership.



A vehicle from the ZLine fleet.

Source: Greater Mercer Transportation Management Association, 2015