

# Building Connections, Free Fares in South Carolina



by Susan B. Richards

At a time when transit systems across the country are raising fares and cutting service in an attempt to cope with gas price increases, TriCounty Link, has expanded service and is offering FREE rides. The Link, a rural system based in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, is providing the free rides as part of a 90-day introductory period for its three new *Commuter Solution* routes implemented in September. The commuter routes pick up customers from park-and-ride locations in the rural areas of Berkeley and Dorchester counties and transport them to where they can connect with the urban system express bus service.

Customers not only ride free on the new commuter routes but throughout the entire fixed-route system until November 30, 2008. The free rides, plus an added incentive for customers to enter a drawing to win a free trip to Las Vegas appear to be working. Ridership doubled within three weeks

TriCounty Link operates in South Carolina's Berkeley and Dorchester counties.

of the start-up date and customers aren't shy about expressing their satisfaction with the new service.

Trenita Manigault who works in downtown Charleston transfers to-and-from the urban system to TriCounty Link five days a week. "The service is great and saves me money. I don't have to fill up my gas tank every three days now. When I've had a long day at work it also helps by saving me the hassle of driving in traffic."

One of the new routes is the direct result of a partnership with the Santee Cooper electric utility company, a major employer in Berkeley and Dorchester Counties. The partnership with TriCounty Link is one component of the utility's recently implemented employee transportation program. Bill McLellan, a Santee Cooper employee, carools from his home in Charleston County to the park and ride where he boards the TriCounty Link for a ride to his job in rural Berkeley County. "People in the media talk a lot about

the need for the public to cut back on our lattes and expensive coffee. I decided to save money on gas by riding the bus and let the people in the oil industry do the cutting back."

The Link, which celebrated its 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary in July, has never had a fare increase and has grown from a predominantly one-county demand-response and contract service to a rural regional system. Currently it provides nine deviated fixed routes, three commuter routes, ten contract routes, and Medicaid service in Berkeley and Dorchester counties. Link management believes this type of service diversity is critical to produce cash flow which in turn provides the most transportation for the dollar in the Low Country.

In late 2007 and early 2008 the Link also implemented three routes in rural Charleston County. The South Carolina Highway 17 North corridor route from the Town of Mount Pleasant to McClellanville

has seen a 40 percent increase in ridership since its start-up a year ago. The other two routes on rural Johns Island serve areas that have never had public transportation. The Johns Island service not only connects residents with the urban system at a local mall, but also allows them to shop, visit the library, go to medical appointments, and run errands on the island. Implementation of the Charleston County routes was made possible with a small portion of a half-cent sales tax passed by voters in 2004. The Link receives one-percent of the 17 percent allocated to public transportation.

The system's cautious growth is a direct result of good planning and direct communication with the communities served. The new routes were developed using feedback received during a series of 2006-2007 public involvement meetings held throughout the entire service area. Link officials also met with opinion leaders and stakeholders. Most were supportive of plans to expand transportation services to meet demand created by the huge growth in population occurring in the area.

Much of the Link's healthy financial condition can be attributed to its leadership. Executive Director, William Hutto, who inherited a rural fixed-route system in 1996, has used his experience in both the public and private business worlds to make the Link a success story.

"The system has provided service over the years to produce cash flow, and with it has come a slow methodical expansion of service," says Hutto. "I learned early on that the only kind of accounting is black ink accounting."

That philosophy is also shared by his board. The nine-member TriCounty Link board is very hands-on when it comes to accounting and customer service. Hutto is very proud of the Link's progress.

"We've come a long way in 12 years, especially with regard to our finances. In the beginning the three counties each contributed \$30,000 a year for the first three years but made it clear that was going to be the extent of their financial investment. They have continued to be supportive in other ways but in order to survive we knew we would have to become self-sufficient and that's what we've

done. Now we're finally at a point where we can start doing more for our communities."

With the implementation of the three routes in Charleston County and the three new commuter routes in Berkeley and Dorchester Counties, the tri-county region now has more transportation options than anywhere else in the state.

Another reason for the Link's success is its' strong partnership with the Berkeley, Charleston, Dorchester Council of Governments. Among other services, the COG provides planning, financial accounting, use of their meeting area, and a line of credit. One product of this relationship is that TriCounty Link has experienced clean audits since its inception in 1996.

Hutto definitely recognizes the value of the partnership, "The BCD-COG has been a vital part of our well being, and we feel this relationship serves as an example to others."

Careful planning and attention to good business practices has paid off. Not only is ridership continuing to grow, but the system took top honors at the 2008 Transportation Association of South Carolina conference. In addition to the Link being named Public Transit Provider of the Year, Hutto received the Director's Award which is awarded at the discretion of the director of the South Carolina Department of Transportation Mass Transit Division.

Free fares, combined with rising fuel costs, have driven massive ridership growth for TriCounty Link.

The Berkeley, Charleston, Dorchester Council of Governments also received a Special Services Award for outstanding transit service accomplishment.

The main reasons for the Link's success is management's dedication to customer service. Responding the customer's needs is a top priority for Hutto and his staff. In response to requests from customers living in the remote areas of Charleston County, management expanded service on the Highway 17 route to include Saturdays in time for the December holiday shopping season. More recently, and after only two weeks in service, adjustments were made to the hours on one of the new commuter routes in response to customer needs.

At a September event celebrating the commuter service start-up, Norris Reid Melton Jr. – representing the Summerville Bus Users & Supporters, a transportation advocacy group – provided an appropriate summary of the Link's corporate philosophy, "There has been wide spread agreement for some time that the one-third of our population living in the fastest growing portion of the tri-county area needs commuter bus service. Instead of listing reasons why such service couldn't be implemented, TriCounty Link listened to the growing demand of local residents and has quietly and proactively put rubber on the road."

*Susan B. Richards is President of SR Concepts.*

