



TRANSIT TIDBITS
Issue 164 January 2026



THOUGHT FOR JANUARY
2026

**Be the person you want to
work with.....**

**DTA BOARD MEETING
SCHEDULED**

Jacque Senger, Executive Director

We will be having a virtual Board Meeting on February 11th and 12th. The Board of Director’s would like to hear any ideas you may have for the upcoming conference. Please send me ideas by the first of February. I will add your thoughts to the agenda.

A GREAT PLACE TO WORK

**Debi Schaner, Administrative Assistant
West River Transit**

West River Transit is such a great place to work. We help people from rural areas to get to their medical appointments, shopping or wherever they need to go. It feels good knowing we are making life a little

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easier for people who don’t always have a way get around. We are a small team with a big heart, and we are proud to be a part of it.

A lot of people are from other states and comment on how they like to ride with West River Transit. They like that our buses aren’t really big and they can visit with other people from their town and surrounding communities while they are riding the bus or van. A lot of people ride the bus or van weekly to come to Bismarck for shopping, appointments, etc.

DTA 2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Jacque Senger, Executive Director

Your 2026 DTA Conference will be held in Huron, SD, September 19th through the 23rd, 2026. The conference will be held at the Huron Event Center and the Rodeo at the SD

State Fairgrounds. We have secured rooms at the Crossroads Hotel. More information will be placed in the Tidbit as we finalize the conference.

WHEELS TO LEARN PROGRAM

Barb Ballensky, Operations Director

Southeast Public Transit

Last spring, United Way and USD Head Start reached out to us with a challenge: families wanted their children to attend Head Start, but many had no reliable way to get there and could not afford the cost of transit. United Way partnered with us to make this possible by contracting for transportation services, launching what is now known as the *Wheels to Learn* program. We began with a small number of riders during the spring semester.

Since then, the program has grown slowly but steadily. This fall we continued to add children, with more joining after the new year. Today, nine children are riding through Wheels to Learn, and it has become a meaningful new contract that supports both our mission and our agency's sustainability.

RAMBLINGS FROM THE TRANSIT FRONT LINE

Terry Hoffman, Co-Director CTWSI

Anyone who works in public transit knows certain conversations come up again and again. They usually happen at conferences, over coffee, or quietly in the office after a long day. Topics like employee retention, recruitment, funding challenges, and the ever-present question of how long we can keep doing more with less.

This month's column is a collection of those thoughts—ramblings, if you will—from the front lines of public transit administration. If you recognize yourself in any of this, you're not alone. And if you

don't, please let the rest of us know how you're managing to sleep so well at night.

Holding On to Employees

For years, we believed that once someone came to work in transit, they were hooked. Once they saw the real impact—how a ride to work, dialysis, or the grocery store truly mattered—employees found purpose in what they did.

That still happens but not like it used to.

Much of our driving workforce is made up of retirees looking for something meaningful to fill their time. Maybe retirement isn't all it's cracked up to be. Or maybe it is—because more and more of those same employees are now retiring again.

At CTWSI, we are actively trying to develop younger staff and plan for the next generation of leaders. While we still have a strong core group of dedicated employees, it's become clear that sustaining that enthusiasm across the entire workforce is a growing challenge.

Recruiting in a Tough Market

Recruiting new drivers continues to come down to two things: wages and benefits.

The reality is that less-than-competitive wages and limited benefit packages are deal breakers for many potential employees. CTWSI offers benefits for full-time staff, but even that isn't always enough. We've explored ways to improve what we offer, but every discussion eventually circles back to funding—and the lack of it.

Like many agencies, we're trying to compete in a labor market that doesn't always value the work we do, even though our services are essential.

Growing Pains and Shrinking Resources

CTWSI currently operates in 12 counties and provides services to three others as needed. In 2025, our ridership surpassed 190,000 rides. Growth like

that should be good news but it also comes with challenges.

Our ridership jumped by 13,000 rides in FY 2024. The following year, funding didn't increase. In fact, it decreased by a penny. In FY 2025, ridership grew by another 3,000 rides, while funding was cut by more than \$10,000. After the first quarter of FY 2026, we are already more than 2,000 rides ahead of last year.

This is the familiar story of public transit: increasing demand paired with shrinking resources. Somehow, we make it work—but the question remains, for how long?

This year's federal funding cuts forced all of us to make difficult decisions. At CTWSI, we raised rates for the first time in several years. It wasn't popular, but the response from the communities we serve has been more understanding than expected.

We also considered trimming service hours, reducing staff, and cutting programs no transit provider wants to pursue. I'm genuinely interested to hear how others are navigating these same pressures, and I hope we can trade ideas when we gather in Pierre next month for Transit Day at the Capitol.

Recognizing the People Who Make It Work

Each fall, the Dakota Transit Association recognizes excellence through awards such as Driver of the Year, Dispatcher of the Year, Support Staff of the Year, Agency of the Year, and Friend of Transit.

Every one of those nominations matters. Agency of the Year is always the hardest to write because every transit agency does remarkable work, regardless of size. Quality matters far more than volume, and some of the best work in transit happens quietly in small communities.

My favorite nomination to write, though, is always *Friend of Transit*. The list of potential nominees is endless—community partners, advocates, and elected officials who genuinely understand and support public transportation.

At CTWSI, we've been fortunate to work with lawmakers who consistently show up for transit. They far outnumber those who never return an email.

I once heard a fellow director say they don't nominate staff for awards because those employees don't do their jobs for recognition. I agree—but recognition does something bigger. It helps tell the story of public transit.

None of us is in this field for fame or fortune. If someone is, they may be in the wrong line of work. But highlighting the people behind the service brings visibility to transit and reminds the public why it matters.

The Takeaway

There isn't a grand conclusion to all of this. No silver bullet. Just a reminder.

Nominate your people. Recognize your partners. Tell your stories.

Because the work matters—and so do the people who make it happen.



Jacquie Senger, Executive Director, DTA

jacquelinesenger@gondtc.com

Cell number 701-740-8894

Tidbit Articles

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