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# Downtown circulators: what works?

## Planning is critical

Wendee Holtcamp, Apr 28, 11.

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Despite the popularity of “downtown circulators” – special buses or trolleys that circulate through downtown– not much literature exists on them. Who rides? Are they successful? Who are the stakeholders?

The Transportation Research Board’s Transit Cooperative Research Program surveyed 78 transit agencies about their experiences and found several trends. [\[Download pdf of report\]](#) Branding of the circulator service, its stops, and the vehicles themselves, particularly when targeting tourists or non-commuters visiting downtown areas, proved critical to their success. A classic example is how tourists associate San Francisco with its downtown trolley system. Sometimes cities would have different ridership (tourists vs. locals) on different

routes.

Ridership varied, with bigger cities having more riders. Only 2 of 13 transit agencies in cities with populations of less than 500,000 had more than 1,000 riders, on average. Those two cities happened to target tourists in the branding of their circulator. Among all circulators surveyed, there was a median ridership of 600 during the week, 1,100 on Saturday and 1,500 on Sunday. Downtown circulators that targeted tourists and visitors tended to have higher ridership, generally, although ridership is not the only measure of success.

Riders preferred simple, straight routes with regular, frequent, and reliable service. Understanding the target

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Riders preferred simple, straightforward routes with regular, frequent, and reliable service. Understanding the target market was important. For example, different cities and different markets vary in their attitudes toward walking. Some riders are willing to walk further distances between stops and destinations, while others are not. Having riders that are averse to walking longer distances is not necessarily a deterrent, and in fact actually helps the success of a circulator system, but only when frequent stops and adequate routes are available.

The survey found that having an “if you build it, they will come” approach was not realistic, and that many local transit agencies had overlooked the issue of maintenance costs of vehicles. Adequate planning and market research is critical in designing a potential downtown circulator route. Partnerships between transit agencies, business associations, tourist bureaus, local attractions and other groups proved critical to a circulator’s success, as well. These partnerships did not have to be financial but having the cooperation among different groups helped get the word out and increased political support.

A consistent reliable funding source proved critical to a circulator’s success. Nearly all circulator systems are funded directly by the transit agency, and relying on voluntary donations did not work well in situations where it was attempted. Environmentally friendly vehicles had higher maintenance costs, and these costs were not always previously budgeted, though the agencies surveyed still believed they were well worth the extra cost.

In addition to the survey, the report included case studies of circulators in Baltimore, Los Angeles, Washington DC, Philadelphia, Hartford, Louisville, and Austin. Austin’s ‘Dillo is the only circulator of the seven that is no longer in operation. It was discontinued in 2009 due to budget issues. Capital Metro started charging \$0.50 in 2007 but it proved “inconvenient” and the negative reaction by riders was stronger than they anticipated. On the other hand, the strong branding made it successful while it was operational, and people still ask what happened to the ‘Dillo trolleys in the city.

These downtown circulators appeal to business interests interested in downtown revitalization, and the lessons learned can help agencies avoid some of the mistakes made by others, and implement other solutions that worked well.

Photo credit: [The Aardvark](#)

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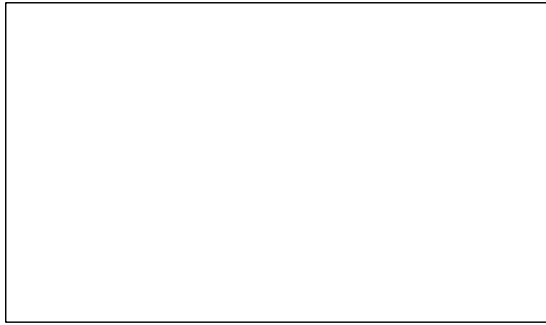
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