

IMTC Cross-Border Transit Study

White Paper #3: Survey of Existing Cross-Border Transit Services

Introduction

The Cross-Border Transit Study is being undertaken by the Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG) to assess current and future demand for regional, cross-border transit and is identifying incremental strategies for developing cross-border transit services.

The IMTC coalition has identified numerous benefits that a cross-border transit system would provide for the Cascade Gateway binational region:

1. Reduction in cross-border personal vehicle trips and related congestion
2. Environmental and efficiency improvements for cross-border work commuting
3. Enhanced travel links for regional shopping, recreation, and tourism
4. Enhanced regional intermodal connections
5. Creation of a transportation system reflective of the degree to which the people of this binational region cross the border as part of daily life.

This project consists of four tasks:

1. Examine current and projected levels of demand for cross-border transit.
2. Identify appropriate transit system links.
3. Define needed at-border processing and procedures.
4. Develop a phased plan for integrating cross-border transit services across the Cascade Gateway.

This study is coordinated by a subgroup of IMTC participants. IMTC is a U.S. – Canadian coalition of government and business entities that was formed in 1997 to jointly identify and pursue improvements to cross-border mobility in the Cascade Gateway.

This white paper is the third of a series produced for the final report of this project. The focus of this paper is to look at possible examples of cross-border transit services by researching existing routes between U.S. and Canadian cities, and U.S. and Mexican cities.

U.S. – Mexico Bus Services

There are several services for both tourists and workers crossing the U.S. – Mexico border at most of the large ports-of-entry.

Mexicoach – San Diego to Tijuana

Mexicoach is the largest U.S. international border-crossing shuttle bus service. The company makes over 96 crossings daily, has a fleet of 15 buses, and has departures every fifteen minutes from 9.00am to 9.00pm every day of the year. All buses are fully insured in the United States and Mexico.

Mexicoach's primary market is tourists. Its buses connect with San Diego at the Border Station where there is a secured parking lot. The San Diego Trolley also operates service to this destination point, where travelers can easily transfer between the trolley and Mexicoach.

Mexicoach buses cross at the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa ports-of-entry (two locations separated by only five miles), choosing whichever is quicker. There is a special border-crossing lane for Mexicoach that is not shared by other buses or cars.

Their service rates are \$3.00 (US) per person round trip.

Border Shuttle – San Diego, California to Tijuana, Baja California

The Border Shuttle service is another private connection between the last stop on San Diego Trolley's Blue Line and downtown Tijuana. It runs every half hour between 9.00am and 9.00pm and costs \$1.50 each way. The bus makes two stops near the Tourist Information Center at the border, and makes one stop in downtown Tijuana. The bus crosses the border at the San Ysidro port-of-entry.

San Diego Trolley – Downtown San Diego to the Border

San Diego Trolley, Inc. is an operator in the Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) of San Diego, California. This public transit service consists of two main routes, one of which terminates at the San Ysidro port-of-entry.

This service does not cross the border, but is an at-border transit link, providing connections to the Border Shuttle and Mexicoach.

The trolley operates on seven and a half minute frequencies during peak morning and afternoon commutes. There is also a 24-hour service on Saturday nights. Tickets cost between \$1.00 and \$2.50 each way depending on location of embarkment. Like most public transportation systems, the trolley has daily and monthly passes as well as tokens.

El Paso-Juarez Trolley Inc. "Border Jumper" – El Paso, Texas to Juarez, Chihuahua

The Border Jumper is a tourist-oriented regularly scheduled shuttle service between the civic center of El Paso and the city of Juarez in Mexico. It runs seven days a week and leaves hourly. There are seven stops made along the route at touristy locations, and these stops are made on both sides of the border. Fare is \$12.50 for adults.

The shuttle serves approximately 3,500 visitors a month. In addition to tourists, some local residents use the service to buy medications or receive dental care in Mexico. Their vehicle is approved for both Mexican and U.S. road systems and is insured on both sides of the border.

Currently the shuttle uses the regular primary lanes to cross the border in both directions. There is a minimal wait southbound into Mexico, but on the return trip to the U.S. the wait is usually between 30-45 minutes in the queue. There has been discussions about the Border Jumper receiving a dedicated lane at the border, and this was supposed to be in place this year. The project has been delayed. It is hoped that the bus line will have its own lane in March, 2003.

U.S. Customs agents walk through the shuttle when it reaches the port-of-entry. Anyone who needs to complete further inspection functions may disembark at the border. If there is a substantial delay, the shuttle leaves without them. The port-of-entry is approximately 5 blocks from downtown El Paso and so those who miss the shuttle can walk back to town.

There have been some complaints from other bus companies about the walk-on inspections that U.S. Customs offers Border Jumper. Other companies' travelers must disembark at the border crossing and reload onto the bus. These complaints may require the Border Jumper's service to change in the future.

Other U.S. – Mexican Bus Routes

There are several other bus companies which service the needs of cross-border workers from the border region of Mexico to a variety of U.S. cities. These include:

- **Los Paisanos** – between Denver, Colorado and Juarez, Mexico via El Paso. Departures are made seven days a week at \$30 (US) each way. There is also service between Denver and Chihuahua for \$50 each way.

- **Americanos USA** – between Denver, Colorado and El Paso, Juarez, and Chihuahua. One way prices are \$40, \$45, and \$62 (US) respectively. Americanos USA also offers service out of Dallas, Houston, Laredo, McAllen, and San Antonio in Texas; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Phoenix Arizona; and El Monte, Los Angeles, and Santa Ana, California.
- **Autobuses de Mexico** – between Denver, Colorado and various locations in Mexico. Crosses the border at El Paso. Also has offices in Greeley, Colorado and Los Angeles.
- **Camionetas Chihuahua** – between Denver, Colorado and Chihuahua. \$70 one way. Also serves the following cities: Greeley, Gypsum, and Colorado Springs, Colorado; Fort Worth, Dallas, and El Paso, Texas; Garden City, Kansas; and Parral and Cuauhtemoc cities in Chihuahua state.
- **El Paso – Los Angeles Limousine Express Inc.** – Between Colorado Springs and Denver, Colorado and Chihuahua, Mexico. \$40 (US) one way to El Paso, \$65 to Chihuahua. Also service to Los Angeles. Has offices in Los Angeles and El Monte, California; Greeley, Colorado; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Phoenix, Arizona.
- **Transportes Baldomero Corral** – Between Tucson, Arizona and various Mexican cities.

These services all have offices in the United States and appear to be U.S. – owned private companies.

U.S. – Canada Bus Services

Transit services across the northern U.S. border are much scarcer than those available between the U.S. and Mexico. There are some initial discussions for forming a cross-border transit link across the Buffalo-Niagara border crossing in New York/Ontario, but currently only Greyhound serves both sides of the border. However, there is one U.S.-Canadian transit connection which exhibits many attributes of a mature, well-supported system that serves a large cross-border ridership.

Transit Windsor

Transit Windsor is a public transit agency with a board of directors appointed by the City of Windsor, Ontario's city council. Transit Windsor offers a tunnel route between Windsor and Detroit, Michigan using the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel. This route operates from the downtown bus terminal in Windsor to downtown Detroit. Special-event service is also offered between Windsor and Detroit for Detroit Tigers and Detroit Lions games, and Comerica Park concerts.

A cross-border transit service was first offered with the opening of the tunnel in 1930, and was operated by the Detroit and Canada Tunnel Company. The company terminated services at the end of January 1982 due to a lack of profitability. Transit Windsor took over the route in February 1982 and has been operating it through the Windsor Chartabus, Inc. company.

Service is provided Monday – Saturday from 5.30am until 1.20am and Sunday and holidays from 8.00am – 12.00am. Buses loop through downtown Detroit and also provide direct service to special events at Cobo Hall in Detroit.

The bus uses a lane dedicated for special trucks and services. There are small bus bays for both directions, at which all passengers disembark for customs and immigration inspections. If a person is refused entry into a country, the immigration services escort that person across to the bus station for returns to that person's country of origin. Transit Windsor does not request fares for those returning after being refused entry into the U.S. or Canada.

Some passengers now have NEXUS cards, which may speed up their clearance process once inside the immigration area.

Fares for the service are set at \$.75 for all passengers, payable in either U.S. or Canadian currency. A monthly tunnel pass is available for \$30 (Cdn) and is only applicable for this route.

Transit Windsor is in constant contact with Detroit's transit service. Transit Windsor abides by all rules and regulations established by Detroit's Department of Transportation and also utilizes their bus stops.

It is of note that Transit Windsor's employees are all insured and licensed in both Canada and the U.S., and also have extended health coverage in both countries. Employees for Transit Windsor and Detroit's public transit are all part of the same union, ATU.

Transit Windsor has been part of transit-related area promotion efforts, jointly sponsored by the Canadian Urban Transit Association and the American Public Transit Association.

Summary

There is only one existing model for U.S. – Canadian cross-border transit partnerships. But, there are numerous examples of privatized services across the U.S. – Mexico border. These examples may provide some insight on how to organize such a cross-border service, as well as how two transit agencies came together to fill a regional transportation need.

One advantage that transit services operating in dense metropolitan regions like Detroit-Windsor and El Paso-Juarez have is that there is little if no distance between the urban centers and the border crossing. Because the urban centers in the Cascade Gateway are farther from the border crossing, this area would likely develop different approaches to cross-border transit, so that passengers who are denied entry into a respective country are not left stranded far from their origin point.

Another advantage the other surveyed crossing services have is that they generally cater to a specific demographic need – either tourism, or a work commute route which is well-defined. The Cascade Gateway transit service would be looking to serve a less-defined, more broad-based group of users, which will result in a different approach to defining the route and schedule.

A strong factor in all surveyed cross-border transit services is access to dedicated lanes or processing booths. Although not all services examined had such benefits, most had some specialized treatment by inspection agencies which allowed for reduced wait-times at the ports-of-entry. This marked benefit seems critical to offering a regularly scheduled service on-time, as well as for encouraging ridership through reduced border wait times.

A suggestion posed by Steve Kapusta, administrator for the Transit Windsor binational route, was to require passengers to have NEXUS cards, thereby allowing the bus to pass through the NEXUS lane and have, in essence, priority treatment at the border crossing. This suggestion would resolve numerous cross-border transit concerns, but severely limits the number of passengers who can utilize the service. It is, however, worth mentioning in this report.

Another possibility may be to use the NEXUS lane to bypass the queues at the border, but then process the passengers somewhere beyond the primary booths. This would improve the reliability of scheduling for buses, and allow inspection agents to individually screen all passengers.

The existence of a successful cross-border transit service run by public agencies in Windsor/Detroit is very encouraging to those considering transit service improvements for the Cascade Gateway. Even the highest levels of service are legally achievable and, with effective coordination between transit and inspection agencies, can be an ascertainable goal.

Appendix

Comparison of Cross-Border Transit Service Features

	Mexicoach	Border Shuttle	San Diego Trolley	Border Jumper	Transit Windsor
Service Area	San Diego, CA – Tijuana, Baja CA	San Diego, CA – Tijuana, Baja CA	San Diego, CA – Tijuana, Baja CA	El Paso, TX – Juarez, Chihuahua	Windsor, ON – Detroit, MI
Public Agency/ Privately Owned	Private	Private	Public – Part of Metropolitan Transit System of San Diego	Private	Public
Route	Border Station – Downtown Tijuana	Border Station – Tourist Info Center in Tijuana	Two routes through San Diego, one terminates at Border Station	El Paso Civic Center – tourist locations in Juarez (7 stops)	Downtown bus terminal, Windsor – downtown Detroit; also special events locations
Frequency	96 crossings daily; every 15 minutes	Every 30 minutes	Every 7.5 minutes; 24 hour service on Saturdays	Every hour	Every 5-10 minutes
Intermodal Connections?	Yes – Links with San Diego Trolley	Yes – Links with San Diego Trolley	Yes – Links with San Diego System		Yes – Links to Detroit and Windsor transit systems
Targeted Market	Tourists	Tourists	No	Tourists	Commuters; Recreational
Fee	\$3.00	\$1.50	\$1.00-\$2.50	\$12.50	\$.75
Special Lane at Border?	Yes	Unknown	N/A	No (Plans for one in 2003)	Yes – For special trucks and services
Inspection Process	Passengers disembark	Passengers disembark	N/A	Walk-on inspection	Passengers disembark
Insured on Both Sides?	Yes	Unknown	N/A	Yes	Yes – also all employees have health coverage both sides