



Things to Do & Places to Go

JULY & AUG 2017

# Around THE PANHANDLE



**OUR 50<sup>TH</sup> ISSUE**

\$2.99  
13 1771947 1 567000 01



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# PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN THE PANHANDLE

**T**he Eastern Panhandle Transit Authority (EPTA) building, located in the shadow of the Martinsburg Airport, is not ornate. Actually, it is rather small and slightly cramped. It is easily overlooked. In no way does it reflect the important and essential task completed by the EPTA of transporting 1,200 to 1,600 riders throughout parts of Berkeley and Jefferson Counties every day.

Many cities and communities around the world provide some form of public transit, whether it is buses, trolleys, subways, or light rail. It eases congestion on the roads, saves passengers time and money compared to alternative modes of transport such as owning a car or taking a taxi, and a good public transit system can even spur economic growth. The EPTA understands the role that public transit plays in a healthy community and how important this task is. Doug Pixler, Director of EPTA, states, "We view public transit as an integral part of the community, and the day-to-day operations are important because it affects so many other parts of the community." Public transit allows people to get to work or school, go shopping, or to get to doctor's appointments.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, general public perception has taken a negative view of public transit. Some people believe that

public transit is only for a small portion of the community. It is that perception that the EPTA is striving to change and it looks like the tide is turning. EPTA reports a 20% increase in ridership over the last four years. That equates to more than 50,000 additional riders every year. The demographic of riders also continues to diversify, covering every part of the community.

The biggest obstacle to changing public perception is making sure that the public is adequately educated about the many uses and programs offered by EPTA. High school students who stay late after school for extracurricular activities or tutoring can ride an EPTA bus home. Those students involved in Berkeley or Jefferson County Schools Work Exploration Program use public transit to go to their job placements. College students going to Shepherd University or Blue Ridge Community and Technical College can ride a bus to and from campus. Employees can ride an EPTA bus to and from work. Schedules and routes have been aligned with common shift changes. Those who don't want the added expense of a monthly car payment, insurance, gas, and maintenance will find that public transit is a reliable and cheaper alternative to get you where you need to go. Using public transit is also a great way to reduce your carbon footprint. "Public Transit is there for everybody," adds Elaine Bartoldson, Assistant Director of EPTA. Both Elaine and Doug confess

that they often use public transit, themselves, to get to work or go shopping.

EPTA buses and vans travel approximately 41,000 miles each month. Chances are there is a bus route that will take you where you need to go, whether it is work, shopping, doctor's appointments, or even local attractions such as Harper's Ferry. With such exponential growth in Berkeley and Jefferson Counties, public transit will become increasingly important to creating a more vibrant community, creating more routes and going to even more places. The growth has already caused the EPTA to transform from a rural public transit system to a small urban system. This change allows for them to be more responsive to the needs of the community and to offer even better service. It also allows them the flexibility to work with new industries that open in the Eastern Panhandle, and modify routes as needed.

EPTA has designed many different and beneficial programs for the community, even partnering with local businesses. Both all-day and monthly passes are available, as are student discounts and half-fare passes for senior citizens, persons with a Medicare Card, or individuals with a verifiable disability. A "Demand Response" program is available to provide pick-up and drop-off at your door. This program is for individuals who live within ¾



of a mile of an existing bus route, but who are unable to navigate the traditional bus line. Reservations for this service must be made at least a day ahead. "Non-Emergency Medical Transport" also allows for door-to-door transportation to doctor's appointments. These trips are scheduled through a state-wide clearinghouse. This program is relatively new, having only started in 2016.

Another great program is the "Get a job. Get a Ride!" program. This program provides a month's worth of bus transportation to work for newly hired employees of EPTA corporate sponsors. The purpose is to provide reliable transportation to work, allow for new employees to save a little money, and also to educate riders on all that public transit has to offer. Details for all of these programs are available on EPTA's website: [eptawv.com](http://eptawv.com).

EPTA is working to meet the needs of the community and its riders,

whatever their situation. They want public transit to be convenient. Buses are equipped with bike racks to make your trip easier. EPTA also welcomes service animals on buses. Cameras have been installed in each bus to help ensure that public transit is a safe way to get around the Eastern Panhandle. They strive to accommodate as many people as possible and make each trip on public transit enjoyable. They are committed to safety, courtesy, and reliability.

Another way that the EPTA is hoping to increase public knowledge and ridership is by taking advantage of technology. "One of our big missions is to push technology in public transit," explains Elaine Bartoldson. A plethora of information is already available online. You can find routes, schedules, and important news all on their website. Recently, text alerts have been added to keep riders informed of changes or delays in routes. A new exciting feature is scheduled to be released this fall. A new "Bus Tracker" app will allow riders to keep track of buses along route so riders can tell exactly when the next bus is arriving, all from their smart phone. This increased

information will allow for riders to make better decisions about their use of public transit.

Of course, one of the most important resources in expanding ridership is the EPTA drivers. They are truly on the frontline of customer service. These friendly men and women often know the riders on their routes. They provide safe and pleasant trips. They are well-trained and continue their training throughout the year to stay current on safety issues. They care about their riders and continue to strive for excellence. They really want you see the advantages of using public transit for all of your trips throughout Berkeley and Jefferson Counties.

Public transit is a viable and easy way to get around the area. The routes are designed to be user-friendly and convenient. The staff is friendly and knowledgeable. It is also a cheaper alternative than car ownership or other modes of transportation. Use of public transit is good for the environment. There are so many good reasons to try public transit. It can meet the needs of anyone in the community. If you want to find out more, visit the website: [www.eptawv.com](http://www.eptawv.com), or give them a call at 304-263-0876.

