



# Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

## Transit Adopt-a-Stop Programs

*Building community ownership in clean and attractive stops.*

By James Decker

**A**dopt-a-stop programs are community initiatives where volunteers agree to pick up litter at transit stops and assist with other maintenance tasks. These programs are valuable to public transportation agencies because they help create a sense of ownership of transit service within the community, enhance the appearance of stops and stations, and improve safety and security for passengers. While such programs predominately exist in urban areas, this low-cost initiative can be a viable option for a rural agency to create a win-win for both their transit service and the community. This article will provide background information regarding adopt-a-stop programs, analyze program results from a recent national survey, and highlight successful case studies to demonstrate how effective an adopt-a-stop program can be on any scale.

### How do they work?

While there is no “one size fits all” formula for adopt-a-stop programs, the general principle is that volunteers will collect stray litter at the site at an agreed-upon interval. The transit agency will often pick up the filled trash bags, although volunteers may opt to recycle or dispose of the trash themselves. Volunteers who agree to adopt a stop may either be individuals or a group such as a business, community group, or other organization. Volunteer responsibilities are typically confirmed in a simple written document outlining the frequency of trash collection and various small details. Upon volunteering for the program, the individual



*Austin, Texas's adopt-a-stop program uses signs on its trash receptacles with a community-minded message inspired by a Beatles song.*

or group is often given public recognition via a sign or a plaque at the adopted site. Some transit agencies also distribute transit passes to volunteers as an additional reward.

Adopt-a-Stop programs have proven to be valuable for numerous reasons. Stops often become unsightly due to debris discarded from patrons, wind that drives leaves and trash into the area, and vandals who damage stop facilities. Keeping these transit stops clean and attractive can consume a significant amount of staff time for overextended transit agencies. An adopt-a-stop program helps alleviate this difficulty by employing volunteer assistance at a stop. A clean, well-cared-for stop is inviting to riders and provides a feeling of safety—features that encourage strong ridership.

In addition to helping keep transit stops clean, the program creates an opportunity for the community to be more involved in the local transit service. This involvement has been shown to create a sense of ownership where communities better recognize the value of the transit service. Often, an established adopt-a-stop program is encouraged to continue and expand due to the perceived benefits of improved stop appearance, public support, image in the community, and improved ridership.

### Adopt-a-stop survey results

In 2013, a study sponsored by the Transit Cooperative Research Program included a survey of 30 agencies and organizations that marketed an adopt-a-stop program. The survey targeted a diverse group of large, small, urban, suburban and rural

systems throughout the United States. The highlights are as follows:

- 78 percent of the respondents reported that an adopt-a-stop program is a means to “enhance station/stop appearance.”
- 85 percent said such programs “encourage citizen involvement, pride, and ownership in their respective communities.”
- The majority of respondents typically spent about \$500 to \$1,000 per year on the program. The money is primarily used for basic cleaning supplies, transit passes, and signage.
- Management of the program required fewer than 16 hours per month.
- Most volunteers (80 percent) received training through printed procedures and guidelines.
- 73 percent of the respondents viewed their adopt-a-stop program to be successful.

The survey revealed that none of the questioned agencies or organizations started their adopt-a-stop program to save costs. While maintenance departments are grateful for the extra help and the ability to free manpower for other responsibilities, improved relations with the community and cleaner, safer stops were reported as the top benefits of the program. Comments from the survey indicated that the adopt-a-stop program created numerous goodwill aspects in the community that cannot be monetized.

### Some examples

We interviewed two transit agencies based on the success of their adopt-a-stop program in urban and rural areas. The first interview was with the Regional Transit District in Denver, Colorado. RTD is the regional authority operating more than 10,000 bus stops in the Denver metro area. An adopt-a-stop program has been in place since 1993, and of the more than 10,000 bus stops in the system, almost 10 percent of these have been adopted by the community.

RTD adopt-a-stop volunteers are required to sign a simple agreement that outlines their responsibilities and duties. Following that, the agency installs a sign at the adopted stop to identify the volunteer, and a trash can is installed at the site. The program’s coordinator then periodically checks the location for compliance or inactivity (i.e. monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually depending on the location and usage). Approximately 50 percent of the volunteers in the program are individual volunteers, and the other half are businesses or community organizations.

Our second interview was with Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District in Portland, Oregon. TriMet is a municipal cooperative agency that provides 79 bus lines for a total of 6,826 bus stops. TriMet’s adopt-a-stop program has been in place since 1998, and as of 2013, 201 bus stops have been adopted by 170 community, municipal, and business organizations. The program is coordinated by a community affairs specialist who is responsible for managing the database for the program, responding to interested volunteers, and interacting with the community.

**A**gency liability: According to a Transit Cooperative Research Program survey, most adopt-a-stop programs (but not all) require volunteers to sign a waiver of responsibility. How these agencies view risk of injury to volunteers and insure against risk was not addressed. It may be valuable to review your agency policy regarding liability and volunteer workers.

The success of the program has created a sense of ownership in the community and has helped provide some relief for maintenance staff.

Similar to RTD, volunteers at TriMet sign a simple agreement that describes volunteer duties (i.e. weekly trash can disposal and report any damage or graffiti). TriMet then installs a trash can that has been affixed with a plaque honoring the volunteering organization at the adopted stop. Unlike RTD, however, TriMet requires volunteers to dispose of the trash bags into TriMet’s own trash dumpsters and only allows organizations to participate in the program. The coordinator has found that it is more manageable and successful to recruit groups rather than individual volunteers.

Allowing only organizations to volunteer creates a limitation in the potential for maintaining rural stops. For example, at RTD, a majority of the adopted stops along rural routes are managed by individuals. Rural volunteer locations seem to depend on a civic-minded individual who regularly uses the stop to ride the bus. This is in contrast to TriMet, where transit stops along rural routes are typically only adopted if they are in the vicinity of a “mini population center.” This organization-only requirement may hinder the adoption of transit stops in truly remote locations.

### Implementing an adopt-a-stop program in a rural community

When asked how this program could function in a rural setting, both RTD and TriMet coordinators stressed the importance of initiating a pilot program, as both of these agencies did. The initial collaboration with a single business or organization will help the agency iron out all of the procedural and organizational details. The media attention from the inaugural adopted stop will also generate buzz that can attract early volunteers to the program. Once the pilot program has been deemed a success, the program can expand to locations where individuals, businesses, or community organizations have expressed interest.

The frequency of maintenance of adopted stops will depend on ridership. The more riders using the stop, the more frequent the trash pick-up.

This process can be slow however, so it is important for early adopt-a-stop programs to be given adequate time to build momentum. The creation of a website, the use of social media, and the advertisement of the program in the bus stop handout and at stops can be used to recruit volunteers.

The program’s coordinator may find it helpful to reach

out to local businesses that are in close proximity to a stop and solicit them to volunteer. These businesses will benefit from the recognition, and the community, transit agency and business will all benefit from the cleaner, safer stop.

### **In sum**

Adopt-a-stop programs are a low-cost initiative for transit agencies to strengthen the operation of public transit in the area. Following the success of urban programs, rural transit agencies have the opportunity to establish a program that fosters community ownership in transit, creates partnerships, and encourages citizen participation in community service. These substantial community benefits, combined with the minimal resources required, makes an adopt-a-stop program a viable initiative for many transit agencies.

For more information on this topic, consult the resources mentioned in the article, and the Sources below. ●

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### **Sources**

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- Phone Interview: Michelle Wyffels, TriMet, October 11, 2013.
- Phone interview: Scott Reed, RTD-Denver, October 10, 2013.