

Local public transit ranks 51st in study

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Two years ago, the Luzerne County Transportation Authority studied the feasibility of running buses to CenterPoint Commerce & Trade Park to accommodate the growing work force at the sprawling commercial development in Pittston Twp.

Two problems became immediately apparent, LCTA Executive Director Stan Strelish said. Because of the park's physical configuration, it would take an hour for a bus just to travel to each of the warehouses there. Then there was the issue of timing: With various shifts starting and ending at different times, when should the route operate?

"It would be almost impossible, not to mention cost-prohibitive, to have a system run to those facilities," Mr. Strelish said. "The bottom line is we cannot afford to put a bus in there."

According to a report being released today by the Brookings Institution Metro-

politan Policy Program, helping people get to where the jobs are is a challenge for public transit agencies in cities across the country.

The report — "Missed

Opportunity: Transit and Jobs in Metropolitan America" — ranked the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre/Hazleton area 51st among the nation's top 100 metropolitan areas in terms of how well its transit systems serve residents and connect them to employment.

Overall, the Brookings analysis found 69 percent of

the working-age residents in the top 100 metro areas live near a transit stop, but only 30 percent of all jobs can be reached even allowing for a one-way, 90-minute commute.

Report co-author Robert Puentes said getting people to jobs should be a priority for public transit, but few of the 371 systems studied use job accessibility to drive route and schedule decisions.

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1. Honolulu, Hawaii
2. San Jose/Sunnyvale/Santa Clara, Calif.
3. Salt Lake City, Utah
4. Tucson, Ariz.
5. Fresno, Calif.

51. Scranton/Wilkes-Barre/Hazleton

The bottom

96. Riverside/San Bernardino/Ontario, Calif.
97. Youngstown/Warren/Boardman, Ohio
98. Augusta/Richmond County, Ga.-S.C.
99. Palm Bay/Melbourne/Titusville, Fla.
100. Poughkeepsie/Newburgh/Middletown, N.Y.

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"This is about how we become more productive, more competitive, more successful. ... We need to get the most bang for the buck from transportation investments," Mr. Puentes said.

In the local metro area, Brookings analyzed the LCTA, the County of Lackawanna Transit System and Hazleton Public Transit. Among the findings:

■ The area ranked 32nd in accessibility, with 73 percent of all working-age residents living within three-quarters of a mile of a transit stop. The accessibility rate was 99 percent for low-income workers, 76 percent for middle-income workers and 52 percent for high-income workers.

■ Only 25 percent of all jobs in the metro area are reachable via transit within 90 minutes. Within 45 minutes, only 7 percent are reachable, which is also the average across all 100 metro areas.

■ In terms of service frequency, the median wait for a bus during rush hour is 20 minutes in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area. That is nearly double the national average of 10.1 minutes.

One factor not addressed in the Brookings analysis is high concentration of nonworking elderly residents in Lackawanna and Luzerne counties. At both LCTA and Hazleton Public Transit, more than half of all riders are senior citizens; seniors represent between 40 and 45 percent of the rider-

ship at COLTS.

Unlike a city such as Philadelphia, where a large proportion of transit users are workday commuters, Northeast Pennsylvania is "kind of in the opposite situation where we are moving people more for social reasons with our senior citizens," Mr. Strelish said.

COLTS executive director Robert Fiume said some of the recommendations that emerged from his agency's recently completed route study analysis are aimed at the job accessibility issue.

Among the changes under consideration are improving service and connections along the Business Route 6 corridor, including the job-rich Dickson City commercial district. COLTS also is looking at extending its evening and Saturday hours on select routes.

"We want to provide as many opportunities as possible for people to get where they need to go within our means of funding," he said. "You have to put service to where the growth is, where the demand seems to be."

But both he and Pat Koch, director of Hazleton Public Transit, said there are limitations, particularly when it comes to developments such as industrial parks. Several years ago, the Hazleton system tried to extend service to Humboldt Industrial Park but could not make it work, Mr. Koch said.

"Humboldt is so large that you don't have a central location, and you can't stop at each

and every factory along the way," he said. "People weren't interested in it. They wanted to be left off in front of their particular plant."

In Pennsylvania, Scranton/Wilkes-Barre trailed only the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington metro area, which was ranked 49th, in the Brookings analysis. It was ahead of Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton (56), Pittsburgh (60) and Harrisburg-Carlisle (62).

Elizabeth Kneebone, another co-author of the report, said the fact that 73 percent of Scranton/Wilkes-Barre's working-age population, including 99 percent of low-income residents, has easy access to public transit is something the metro area can build on.

"If one of transit's goals is to help those connect those who might be most dependent on it to opportunities, that is a really positive starting place," she said.

In releasing the report, Brookings officials said now is not the time for drastic cuts in transit funding, which would only worsen access problems.

Mr. Strelish seconded that.

"Everybody keeps telling us to do more with less, but we're trying just to do the same amount we have with less," he said. "It's impossible to do more with less — that statement has to be thrown out."

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