



Innovation Award Application 2014



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Late Night Express - A Safe Ride Home

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Describe the Program/project/ product/ service innovation:

The goal of the Late Night Express is to provide a safe way home for individuals visiting Mankato's downtown entertainment district. Mankato has a significant concentration of bar/restaurants in the downtown area with 18 establishments possessing on-sale liquor licenses. These establishments are comingled with local government offices, banks, a post office, a civic center as well as other office buildings. The comingling of these businesses allows for efficient use of parking during the day and evening. Additionally, this mixed use parking provides enhanced economic impact to the city's downtown area. The Late Night Express bus service is targeted at the Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSU) student population, and the service area reflects that decision. Following is a list of critical information used in operations:

- 1) Service is aligned with the MSU academic school year.
- 2) Service is a one way trip home (nobody is allowed to ride the bus back to the downtown area).
- 3) Service is only available within a defined area.
- 4) Cost to ride the bus is \$1.00 and nobody is turned away.
- 5) The bus driver maintains direct contact with police.
- 6) There are three on-board situations that require the bus driver to contact police: fighting, passing out and getting sick. Other situations are left to the bus drivers' need / discretion.
- 7) There is no predetermined route. The bus driver provides service to the location that has the most riders first and works his way through the remaining passengers, making only one stop at each apartment complex.
- 8) As soon as the bus is empty, the bus driver immediately returns downtown using the quickest route available.
- 9) There are no set departure times from downtown; this is left to the judgment of the bus driver and police.
- 10) Normal hours of operation are 12:00 a.m. - 3:00 a.m. Saturday & 12:00 a.m. – 3:00 a.m. Sunday.
- 11) One 44 passenger bus is used most weekends.
- 12) Additional buses are brought into service for: MSU homecoming,

Halloween's nearest weekend or on a Thursday (if it falls on this day) and the weekends of MSU commencement.

Short description of the importance, internal impact, and community benefits:

MSU has approximately 15,000 students and is in close proximity to the downtown entertainment district. Students provide a substantial economic boost to the local economy and the city's goal is to provide a safe alternative to driving home. According to Highland Park Association member Tona Gillispie: "The Late Night Express provides safety in numbers since the bus ride averts students from driving and walking". Additional community benefits:

- 1) A reduction to almost zero for vandalism calls during service hours.
- 2) Fewer calls for service to the police department during the hours of operation.
- 3) Reduced driving under the influence citations.
- 4) Ability to help depopulate the downtown area fairly rapidly, thus substantially reducing chances of mob behavior.

What makes this a quantum leap of creativity?

When the program was initially under consideration there was a great deal of skepticism from the City Council and Mankato residents. The debate centered on the concern that the city would be encouraging people to drink alcohol. Critical to launching, was the ability to arrive at a creative solution for making the program palatable to our residents, council members, businesses and still provide a useful service. Creative keys to making the program a reality and very successful are:

- 1) Service provides a one way trip home.
- 2) Affordable pricing so nobody is refused a ride.
- 3) Close working relationship between Public Safety and Mass Transit.

Staff "Quick Stats" are provided to the deputy director of public safety every Monday morning so they can be discussed at staff meetings. Staffing for the following week is then finalized and discussed with Mass Transit. Additionally, end of semester reviews are conducted to make any program revisions for the following semester.

Who benefits?

The program beneficiaries are:

- 1) Mankato's year-round residents (reduced vandalism).
- 2) The Public Safety department (reduced calls for service).
- 3) The downtown merchants (improved patronage).
- 4) MSU students (a safe alternative to driving)

How was the program/project/product/service initiated and implemented?

The fall semester following a particularly eventful MSU Homecoming weekend the President of MSU (Richard Davenport) and The City Manager (Patrick Hentges) requested that one-way bus service be investigated between MSU and the downtown entertainment district. Initially, began as a free service, we very quickly saw the need to charge a fare to cover the costs of fuel, repairs and operator wages. We also determined early on that there was very little need to provide service to the MSU dormitories and changed our service area to concentrate on off campus student housing units.

What risks were taken?

- Risk 1) The city appearing to encourage drinking.
Risk 2) Not being able to control a crowd on a large bus, most of whom were perceived to have been drinking to excess.
Risk 3) Potential for violence on the bus.
Risk 4) Service not provide to all areas of the city.

What, if any were the costs and/or savings?

The initial cost(s) are locating or having a vehicle(s) to provide a service that's reliable enough not to break down on a regular basis. Additional costs are: insurance, fuel, repairs and bus driver wages. Savings are realized by the Public Safety department through reduced calls for service, reduced staffing levels and to individuals who may have chosen to drive under the influence and received a driving under the influence citation.

What are the lessons learned that other local governments can learn from?

Lessons learned:

- 1) Charge a fare that's affordable to most people so the service is attractive.

- 2) 99% of those people that now use the service simply want to get home safely and greatly appreciate an affordable option to do so.
- 3) Violence / fighting on the bus is almost a non-issue.
- 4) Operate within a fairly constrained and defined service area.
- 5) Many groups benefit from the service, which is no longer perceived as a service for out of control college students.
- 6) The cost to operate is offset vs. the benefits provided.
- 7) There may be resistance from the City Council and/or residents to provide any funding for what is perceived as a service enabling binge drinking (this has proven not to be the case). How the program is discussed and presented internally and publically is important to success. Early and effective communication about goals with stake holders (city officials, entertainment district businesses, university officials and students) is critical.
- 8) Including private transportation providers (cab companies) in the planning process ensures they understand the program objectives / limitations and support the service that is being proposed.

What department and/or individual(s) championed the innovation? If a contractor was used, please list the name and their contact information.

The champions of this program were:

- 1) Mankato City Manager's Office (Patrick Hentges)
- 2) MSU president (Richard Davenport)
- 3) Mankato Department of Public Safety (Matt Westermayer)
- 4) Mankato Mass Transit (Mark Anderson)

Any additional information you would like to share?

The city of Mankato has been operating the service since 2004 and has been able to refine the program to a point where resources can meet demand effectively. Additionally, strong support from police and Public Safety administration has been a critical factor in the program's ongoing success.

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