After decades of steady increases, public transit agencies across the country saw ridership come to a screeching halt in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic hit northeast Ohio, though, the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority faced revenue constraints, increased expenses, and decreasing population and ridership. But RTA staff understood how critical public transit is for equity and community vitality. In addition, stimulus funds offered unexpected opportunities to change direction. Here is how the RTA was able to create a path to a more stable, accessible future for Greater Cleveland through strategic planning and public-private partnerships.

FACING EVOLVING CHALLENGES
Before the pandemic, the RTA provided public transportation services for as many as 115,000 customers on a typical weekday, for about 32 million total annual rides in the metropolitan area. The RTA’s largest source of revenue is Cuyahoga County’s 1 percent sales and use tax, but this hasn’t increased as quickly as general operating expenses. And ridership has been decreasing steadily over the last decade, tracking with population declines in Cleveland and Cuyahoga County. Despite declines and revenue challenges, raising the cash base fare was not an option—and hasn’t been since 2018, when the Board of Trustees permanently deferred a 25-cent rate increase.

About the Greater Cleveland Regional Transport Authority
The Greater Cleveland Regional Transport Authority was formed in 1975 to provide public transit services to the 59 communities and 1.2 million residents in Cuyahoga County. As the largest public transit agency in the State of Ohio, and the only one with rail service, RTA’s service options include bus, bus rapid transit, trolley, paratransit, and three rail lines.
Infrastructure posed another challenge. The RTA operates the only rail system in Ohio, and the legacy system requires ongoing infrastructure maintenance and updates. Such investments have created a strain in other capital projects, delaying them for years and increasing the size of the unfunded capital project list to a total of nearly $550 million in the 2019 to 2023 Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). The cost for new rail cars alone was estimated at $300 million.

The final and perhaps most daunting challenge is tied in with the RTA’s mission of “Connecting the Community.” In 2020, the Center for Community Solutions identified Cleveland as the poorest big city in the nation, ranking it No. 1 in child poverty, No. 2 in working adult poverty, and No. 3 in senior adult poverty.

The challenges were enormous, so RTA staff and leadership embarked on developing a new strategic plan to create a “framework for the future” to fiscal year 2030. The strategic planning process would embrace both capital planning and operational planning. Then the pandemic hit during the early planning stages. As Kay Sutula, director of the Office of Management and Budgeting, put it, “Public transit provides a critical mobility lifeline. Our residents rely on public transit to connect them to jobs, medical appointments, pharmacies, grocery stores, and more.” Transit’s role as an essential service became even more starkly apparent as COVID-19 created disproportionate effects on low-income and minority communities across the country.

Rajan Gautam, deputy general manager of Finance and Administration, said: “When the pandemic hit, we had these pressures, but we also knew we had a responsibility to uphold. We made a commitment to Cleveland and to the county that we would not cut service, have furloughs, or lay off staff. We knew our ridership, our employees, and our community needed us.”

CONFRONTING THE FUTURE

It’s one thing to realize the role an essential service plays—and another entirely to ensure it is funded and operational for both present and future. As the shutdowns unfolded in March 2020, the executive leadership team turned to Gautam to determine how long current operating reserves could keep transit lines running without disruptions. His answer? “One to two months; and then the 1% revenues would keep us going longer.”

Soon, news came of federal stimulus funding to come, and RTA leadership took a long-term perspective as they considered the potential. “We really focused on how we could make this count,” Gautam said. “Years from now, we wanted to be able to say, ‘Look what we were able to accomplish and achieve with this funding.’” The prospect of using the stimulus funding to make the greatest difference for the RTA’s employees, the organization, and the community shaped the initial approach to and discussions about a strategic plan.

BUILDING A 10-YEAR PLANNING TOOL

Strategic planning in partnership with the community was already underway by late 2019. The planning team incorporated the 2020 pandemic disruption, shifting perspective to bring customers, stakeholders, and the broader community more fully into the process.

Five key pillars were incorporated into the strategic plan:

- **Economic impact study.** Completed by Cleveland State University’s Center for Economic Development, the study quantified the annual economic benefit the RTA generated for Cuyahoga County, highlighting the importance of its services to the region’s residents and employers.

- **Fare equity study.** This study helped leadership better understand ridership and the relationships among changes in fares, fare structure, fare collection, ridership, and revenue. It included fare equity analysis, among evaluations.
Rail car study. This comprehensive evaluation of heavy and light rail fleets reviewed vehicles and their condition, necessary infrastructure and maintenance facility improvements, and estimated costs.

Efficiency study and operational review. The Greater Cleveland Partnership completed a financial analysis and economic forecast for the RTA that included peer benchmarking, market risk, financial issues, cost efficiencies, revenue enhancements, key performance indicators, and bridging funding gaps.

System redesign study. This study analyzed bus routes and sought public input on potential system-wide redesign alternatives. The outcome included two conceptual networks focused on generating high ridership and levels of funding—and resulted in the June 2021 implementation of NextGen RTA.

Each pillar helped guide strategic planning of services, customer experience, operational performance, funding, infrastructure, and more.

The RTA’s Strategic Plan includes analyses of existing conditions, priority corridors, capital projects, infrastructure repair, transit technology, and new mobility.

GFOA BEST PRACTICES

In addition, Gautam, Sutula, and other team members followed GFOA best practices to guide public engagement, financial forecasting, and budget preparation.

“We’ve built ties across our community,” Sutula noted, “including with local legislators and higher education institutions like TriC and Cleveland State University. We are also working closely with specific communities or on specific partnerships that serve community needs.” Sutula pointed to one such example, the RTA Community Immunity Bus, which provides a mobile clinic on wheels to deliver vaccinations via public transit.

Customers and the community were engaged for input, including for the System Redesign Study, through public meetings, Facebook Live events, and online and print surveys. As Gautam and Sutula explained, insights and analysis staff’s understanding. “We learned that people in more developed areas had the resources to buy monthly fare passes and were able to get the most significant discounts,” Gautam said. “It helped us see the unintended inequity—and guide ways we could address it from both an equity lens and a technology perspective.” Gautam pointed to the 2021 rollout of mobile ticketing, which includes fare capping to provide greater equity. Another component is the new Community Connection Line, which riders can use to provide feedback—another example of technology transforming customer experience and connecting the RTA to the community.

Strategic planning has also guided capital planning and the drawdown of $315 million in stimulus funds. “The stimulus funds are equal to one year’s annual operating budget,” Gautam explained, “so our planning has been about stretching what we’re able to do for today and tomorrow.”

As the RTA moves toward 2030, continued planning considerations will focus on how roles will change, how quickly new technologies will reach maturity sufficient for widespread adoption, and how to future-proof the transit network against a range of possibilities. The RTA looks to balance customer input, new technologies, and business partnerships to guide wise investment planning for services and infrastructure.

Like many metro areas, the greater Cleveland area is facing some tough realities. The Greater Cleveland RTA, though, is committed to being part of the change it wants to see—and it has guided planning and decision making with an eye to securing the future. “The decisions we implemented from 2019 through 2022 are helping create a sustainable transit system,” Sutula said. “It’s about providing the best service not only our customers but also for the entire region—today and tomorrow.”