



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON  
AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard  
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**HONORING NATIONS: 2010 HONOREE**  
**CTUIR Public Transit**  
**Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation**

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*In most rural areas of America, if you do not have a car it is difficult to get around. Without transportation, people must depend on friends or family for rides. It can be tough to plan medical appointments, maintain work schedules, shop for necessities, or sign up for classes. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) found this lack of mobility in and around their reservation troubling. In response, they decided to sponsor a bus and taxi-voucher service for travel in the area. Now recognized by both state and federal transit officials as one of the most efficient and capable public transit systems in the Pacific Northwest region, CTUIR Public Transit has opened up new opportunities for tribal citizens and strengthened relations with neighbors.*

**New Jobs but No Way to Get There**

Located on the outskirts of Pendleton, Oregon, the Umatilla Indian Reservation has been home to the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla people since the three tribes ceded much of their homeland (what is now northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington) to the federal government in the Treaty of 1855. Life for the citizens of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation has changed rapidly over the last several decades. Until recently, the community struggled with high unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and widespread poverty. In the mid-1990s, the Confederated Tribes opened a small casino, followed by several businesses including a hotel, RV park, golf course, cultural institute, and a technology company. These tribal enterprises revitalized the local economy and made CTUIR one of the largest employers in Eastern Oregon.

It quickly became noticeable that potential tribal employees were finding it difficult to get themselves to work. Longstanding poverty meant that many residents did not own cars, and a large number did not even have driver's licenses. Since the reservation's limited housing could not keep up with demand, almost half of the area's tribal population lived in nearby Pendleton. The result was that citizens put themselves in danger by hitching rides or walking the five miles of highway shoulder between the city and the reservation. One tribal official notes that, "in some cases, it was harder for tribal members to get to the job site than to get a job or even housing." In short, a lack of transportation options prevented tribal citizens from taking advantage of local employment opportunities and made it difficult for reservation businesses to attract employees and customers.

## **All Aboard the Walla Walla Whistler**

In 2001, the Confederated Tribes launched a public transit system for the reservation and surrounding area. Commuter buses run several times a day, providing service to ten neighboring towns and cities in five counties in two states. The bus system is open to anyone in the service area, whether or not they are tribal members. What distinguishes CTUIR, in part, is its stated objective of *coordinating* with other regional transit systems, thus more effectively expanding access and opportunities for area residents – tribal and non-tribal. A taxi voucher system — available only to CTUIR citizens and non-tribal members who work for or are doing business with the Confederated Tribes — serves those who cannot use the buses, such as employees working swing and evening shifts, or the elderly who require door-to-door service. Individuals take a local private taxi to get to their destination, but only pay 20% to 40% of the cost out of pocket.

The CTUIR Public Transit system promises its riders “predictable, consistent, and reliable services.” The system is primarily funded through Federal Tribal Transit funds, Small City and Rural Program funds, BIA Indian Reservation Road funds, contributions from the tribal administration budget, and state grants for county transit authorities. The latter is an Oregon Special Transportation fund, and is a designation the Tribes fought hard to win through the state legislature. Oregon’s recognition of CTUIR’s tribal sovereignty compels state agencies to interface with the tribe on a government to government basis. The buses are owned by CTUIR Public Transit and tribally managed through contracts with two area transit providers. All bus routes are free, with the exception of one bus that makes a sixty mile trip to the city of LaGrande, Oregon for two dollars. The bus routes have meaningful names that are associated with the Confederated Tribes, such as the Cayuse Commuter and the Walla Walla Whistler.

The transit system is a runaway success. By 2009, area residents used the system for approximately 33,000 bus rides and over 12,000 taxi rides per year. In 2010, combined ridership climbed to an impressive 60,000. The daily bus routes link the reservation to three airports, Amtrak rail, major regional businesses and shops, eight hospitals, four universities, and three community colleges. The buses are interconnected with other non-tribal regional systems, so that riders can transfer at regional hubs to travel anywhere in the country. Riders use CTUIR buses and taxis for a multitude of reasons such as after school activities, grocery shopping, and getting to work. The primary reason people use the tribe’s transit system, however, is a resounding one, to save money while also reducing their carbon footprint.

## **Offering Transit Service in Traditional Territory**

By managing their own transit system, the Confederated Tribes can quickly respond to the needs of their citizens. For example, during the school year, buses run from the middle school and high school to the reservation so that children can participate in extracurricular activities. Taxi services take elders door-to-door to important community events or medical appointments that they might otherwise miss. Crucially, the transit system has made it more attractive and possible for tribal citizens to return to live on tribal lands, since they have easy access to shops and services in nearby municipalities. Transit connections are also an important tool for attracting non-tribal businesses to the reservation, since they know employees from all over the region can easily and reliably access the job site.

What is most remarkable about the CTUIR transit system, however, is that it reaches well beyond the boundaries of the reservation. While transit systems usually stop at municipal boundaries, CTUIR buses operate throughout the tribes’ pre-reservation territory in the Columbia River basin. With their sovereign government status, the Confederated Tribes have

negotiated agreements with neighboring local and regional governments to provide transit services across jurisdictions. The end result is that, although the Confederated Tribes have a total enrollment of just over 2,800 tribal members, the public transit system serves the entire region and its population of over 275,000. In fact, the Tribes' transit service area now coincides with the boundaries of the 6.4 million acres of land that were ceded to the U.S. in the Treaty of 1855.

By serving all area residents, Indian and non-Indian, the transit system has increased the visibility of the Tribes and also created an enormous amount of goodwill with neighboring jurisdictions. The Confederated Tribes manage and fund a service to the region that did not exist before, using tribal resources to benefit both their own citizens and their neighbors. Consequently, many non-tribal members in the area have found work with tribal enterprises and other businesses located on the reservation. In fact, CTUIR Public Transit figures show that 40% of the taxi vouchers are used by employees who work on the reservation.

Public transit benefitting rural residents would not exist now or 25 years from now if not for the Confederated Umatilla Tribes. Ironically, even fortuitously, CTUIR provides public transportation services to places and along routes used by the tribes for thousands of years in their homeland territory. Because of sovereignty and the practice of self-governance the tribes transcend political barriers and jurisdictional boundaries to provide essential services and economic development enhancements where state and local governments are not empowered with either a regional sense of responsibility, vision, or authority.

### **Bringing the Lessons Home**

Highly successful public transit systems in America's rural areas are rare. This lack of transportation can make it difficult for people to make meaningful contributions to their own lives, as well as to their families and their communities. Working in close cooperation with other governments, the Confederated Tribes started a top-quality bus and taxi voucher service to make it easier and cheaper for area residents to access jobs and services. By seamlessly connecting the reservation to nearby communities, CTUIR Public Transit has improved the quality of life for tribal and non-tribal citizens, boosted the area's economy, and strengthened ties with neighbors. The benefits are felt by everyone who lives on the Confederated Tribes' ancestral lands.

### **Lessons**

- 1** Strategically conceived, public transportation can help a tribal nation meet its social, health, and economic goals.
- 2** A transit system that crosses multiple jurisdictions can strengthen tribal sovereignty.
- 3** Tribal programs that serve both on and off reservation communities can change perceptions through user education and experience.

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