April/May 1996
Volume 9, Number 2

The Abell Report

What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

ABELL SALUTES: Breezy Bishop and The High Flying Doves of Western High

All athletes have a coach, but the female athletes at Western High School have a coach *and* a personal publicist. Her name is Breezy Bishop, and as she describes her role, "I *market* every student to the best colleges in the country!" Sales objective: an athletic scholarship, an academic scholarship, or both for each and every student.

Breezy Bishop is the women's basketball coach at Western, the oldest female public high school in America, and she is as unique as Western itself. Every fall she writes, raises the funds for, and publishes a 20-page booklet she calls "Western High School *Doves*." It is 20-pages of illustrated hyperbole, unapologetic hard sell, for her players and Western. "*Doves* fills a special need that women athletes have but the men don't. The media sell the males. The women need to be showcased on their own, and that is where *Doves* comes in."

Every fall the *Doves* fly into the athletic coach's office of every college in the country—" from Adelphi to Youngstown State," she says, "including the Naval Academy and West Point and the Ivies. Every college hears about my *Doves*."

What they hear is that Western prepares its students to do well in college (average college placement is 85 percent for the last 20 years and over 90 percent for the last five); pictures of administrators and her "special people" who are helpful to the program; and

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"Help Wanted"

Moving Forward With Reverse Commuting; Needed, A Strategy

A "Mobility Strategy" Could Make A Positive Difference to Baltimore City and to the Entire Baltimore Region. But Developing One Has Proven, Historically, Difficult.

The Goal is to Connect Inner City Employees With Suburban Employers.

The tragic death of 17-year old Cynthia Wiggins in Buffalo, N.Y., on Dec. 14, 1995 has focused national attention on a hidden agenda in public transportation—bus route discrimination.

Ms. Wiggins was struck and killed by a 10-ton dump truck while crossing Walden Avenue, a busy, 7-lane highway with no sidewalk. The highway serves the glamorous Walden Galleria Mall in suburban Buffalo, where Ms. Wiggins worked as a cashier in Arthur Treacher's Fish and Chips. Every evening, to catch her bus back to the inner city, she was forced to make the dangerous crossing over the highway. She had no choice. She could not catch the bus at the Mall; buses from the city are not allowed on the Mall's grounds.

In this case a policy that works to discourage people who live in the city from working in the suburbs cost Ms. Wiggins her life, a sad first. But the policy has an inhibiting effect every day on employment opportunities for people who live in the city looking to work in the suburbs. Kenneth Cowdery, who runs a job training center in Buffalo, says he saw more than 100 jobs go unfilled last year because his mostly black clients couldn't find a way to get to work.

But to see the deleterious effect when, with jobs scarce in the city but plentiful in the suburbs, city residents are denied the opportunity to work in the suburbs because reasonable, workable transportation isn't there, one need not go to Buffalo. Baltimore will do.

For example: If a resident of Baltimore City lives in West Baltimore, say in the area of Walbrook Junction, and works in Hunt Valley, he or she must first get to North Avenue (walking, or by connecting bus); then take the No. 13 bus east to North and Mt. Royal avenues; then, the Light Rail to Timonium; then the No. 9 to Hunt Valley; then, depending, a connecting bus. The trip, when all goes well, takes about an hour and 25 minutes.

If the resident lives in Cherry Hill and needs to get to work in Owings Mills, he or she must get (walking, connecting bus) to the Light Rail Cherry Hill Station and take the Light Rail to Lexington and Eutaw streets; then, the subway to Owings Mills; then, depending, a connecting bus. The trip will take about an hour and 20 minutes.

According to Morris Wilson, manager of operations, planning and sched-

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uling for the Mass Transit Administration (MTA), commutes from Baltimore's inner city to jobs in the suburbs can take from an hour to an hour and 15 minutes—when all goes according to schedule, to as much as an hour and a half to two hours, door to door.

This situation—this difficulty for city residents to get to and from jobs in the suburbs— prevails notwithstanding the *decreasing* number of jobs in Baltimore City and the *increasing* number of jobs in the suburbs. Is "reverse commuting"—the process by which low income urban residents are linked to suburban jobs—one answer to the problem?

Reverse Commuting: Background

In the 1980s, regional economies throughout the northeast and midwest witnessed unprecedented suburban growth and urban disinvestment. A number of reverse commuting programs were established to address the problem that resulted. Only a few of the programs survived the economic slowdown that ushered in the 1990s.

For a number of reasons, interest in reverse commuting has recently re-emerged. First, a modest economic rebound has created more entry-level job opportunities in the suburbs while urban unemployment continues unabated, magnifying the job disparity between city and suburb. Second, public transit routes from the city to suburbs are still lacking (or cumbersome at best) and individual automobile ownership is still largely a phenomenon of the suburban middle-class. Finally, welfare reform efforts underway in Congress will likely require that welfare benefits be linked to job placement for a majority of recipients. Job placement advocates and community leaders recognize that helping inner city people to find and keep jobs is critical. Some believe that finding jobs is so important that it must be done, even if that means subsidizing the cost of the job seekers' commute to the job-rich suburbs.

While several reverse commuting programs across the country have demonstrated success, the arrangement has many shortcomings. For example, the long commutes often required to reach outlying jobs are not appealing to everyone. Also, there is some question about whether the programs can be operated on a level to achieve significant scale. Can programs be developed on a region-wide basis through local transit agencies without losing the benefits that often come with those programs organized at the community level? Is it desirable or financially feasible to operate dozens of community-based reverse commuting programs throughout a city?

History

As of September 1993, the American Public Transit Association (APTA) had identified 37 operating reverse commute programs in the country and they estimate that another 15 have emerged since then. APTA estimates that nearly 500,000 individuals are served by these programs which are designed to transport urban residents to suburban jobs through a variety of efforts including fixed bus routes, van pools, shuttle buses, rail, car pools, minibuses, and other modes.

Employment Mismatch

One of the most pressing problems facing U.S. metropolitan areas was recently described by Dr. John Kasarda, Director of the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. According to Dr. Kasarda, "Jobs requiring a high school education or less have left the city and moved to the suburbs while poorly educated minorities remain residentially constrained in inner-city housing." Older cities in the northeast and midwest have suffered the most.

Between 1980-90, two-thirds of the jobs created in the 60 largest metropolitan areas were outside the city. Baltimore was among the top four leading the nation in this regional disparity, behind only Washington, Atlanta and Denver. In manufacturing alone, metro centers nationally lost 288,000 jobs during the 1980s while outer-city areas gained 353,000.

Suburban populations also grew to the point that in 1970, total suburban population exceeded total central city population for the first time in American history, a trend that continues. Suburban population growth, however, has not kept pace with suburban employment growth. In 50 of the 60 largest metro areas, the growth rate of employment in outer areas exceeded population growth by a multiple of three or more.

Transportation Deficiencies

For many city residents, suburban jobs are simply out of reach. Public transportation lines were built to move suburban workers into downtown employment centers and are deficient in servicing a reverse commute. Sprawling suburban job centers are not adequately serviced by mass transit systems which depend on concentrations of employment and population to provide a sufficient volume of ridership.

As a result, many, if not most, suburban jobs are inaccessible to individuals without automobiles. In the St. Louis region, for example, one-half of all of the jobs are considered to be totally inaccessible by public transit. Similarly, only one-half of the job growth in metropolitan Newark was found in areas considered accessible by transit.

Automobile commuting is also out of the question for many low-income city residents. One study in Detroit estimated that in 1989, 30% of all households in the city had no car and 40% had one automobile. A study of households in Near South and West Side Chicago found that 43% had no car and further found that job counselors could not tell

The Abell Report
Published bi-monthly by
The Abell Foundation
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workers how to use public transit to get to suburban work sites. One nationwide study found that only 60% of households with incomes under $10,000 have access to a vehicle while 99% of households with income over $40,000 own at least one vehicle.

Clearly, the urban poor have not only lost proximity to jobs but the means to get to jobs. Reverse commuting programs have emerged as one way to help city residents to reach jobs in the suburbs.

Baltimore's Experience

In the first quarter of 1995, Baltimore City had 381,107 jobs, approximately 36% of those found in the region. By comparison, the five counties surrounding Baltimore City had 676,131 jobs or 64% of those found in the Baltimore Metropolitan region. Most of the suburban jobs were found in Baltimore County, which had 323,411 jobs or 31% of those found in the region, only slightly less than the number of jobs in the city.

Perhaps more important than the number of jobs is the rate at which jobs grew over the twenty year period from 1970-1990. The region as a whole experienced a 41% growth in jobs, but all of it was found in the suburbs. In fact, city jobs decreased by 3.7% while jobs in the suburbs increased by 46% over the same twenty year period.

Just in sheer numbers, with 381,107 jobs in the city and 676,131 in the rest of the region, prospects for finding a job in the suburbs should be stronger. Admittedly, the fact that these jobs are spread out over a larger land area makes the task of job hunting more daunting.

The trends regarding workers have mirrored the job shifts to the suburbs. The number of workers in the region grew 43% between 1970 and 1990 while the city recorded a 10% decline in workers. During this same period, the number of workers residing in the suburbs increased by 83%.

Between 1990 and 1994, the trends in the number of workers residing in the region began to stabilize but the suburbs continued to be favored over the city. As the number of workers residing in Baltimore City declined by 3.1%, the surrounding counties showed a slight increase (1.3%).

While jobs and people have moved from the city to the suburbs, the unemployment problem has not. Baltimore City's unemployment rate was 9.2% in October 1995, the highest in the state, compared to a regional average of 5.8% and a national average of 5.2%. If the number of individuals who have dropped out of the labor force or are institutionalized were added to the equation, Baltimore City's unemployment rate would be even higher. Anne Arundel, Carroll, and Howard Counties experienced unemployment rates under 4%, a sign of a tightening labor market. Clearly, the regional mismatch found throughout the country is also apparent in Baltimore.

Help Wanted

"Help Wanted" signs are regularly found in suburban job centers like BWI Airport, Owings Mills, Hunt Valley and White Marsh, because the suburban workforce has not kept pace with job growth. In some areas even farther from the City (Howard, Carroll, Harford and Anne Arundel Counties) a shortage of entry level workers has emerged as better educated and more highly skilled residents find higher-paying jobs. Poor public transportation access from the labor abundant inner-city has exacerbated the problem.

It is difficult to obtain the exact number of job openings or the magnitude of the supply of jobs in the suburbs. Paul Glidden, with the Maryland Department of Economic and Employment Development, reported receiving 8,602 job openings in Baltimore City in fiscal 1994, compared to 17,681 openings in the surrounding counties. While Baltimore City had the most openings of any single jurisdiction, it was the only jurisdiction in the region to have fewer openings in 1994 than in 1993. By comparison, the five surrounding counties recorded an average increase in openings of 21% in 1994.

Unfortunately, data regarding job openings is not kept uniformly and data about job gains and job losses do not necessarily indicate a problem if the population changes proportionally. Anecdotal information from temporary agencies, employers, and job placement agencies appears to provide the best indication about the demand for workers.

A telephone survey of several major temporary agencies revealed that there is a severe demand for data entry workers in the suburbs. One personnel agent said, "We simply cannot find enough people to fill the data entry jobs." Another agency mentioned a shortage of workers to fill the second and third shifts of light industrial jobs in the suburbs.

According to Neil Shpritz, executive director of the BWI Airport Business Association, there is a constant demand for entry-level workers in this part of Anne Arundel County. While many of the jobs are found in the hotels in the area, other opportunities have emerged with warehouse and distribution companies and in back-office centers such as Northwest Airlines and Aetna Insurance. The business association has already instituted a program to guarantee a ride home to any worker who takes public transportation or car pools and is forced to miss his/her ride home due to a work scheduling conflict.

One Howard County job counselor remarked that there are ample entry level opportunities available in many parts of Columbia. A Baltimore City job placement agency recently turned down the opportunity to place six city residents in jobs in Columbia because the residents lacked transportation access. Similar stories are often heard at meetings of job training organizers.

The Washington Post recently reported that "Businesses across the area are having difficulty filling entry-level jobs that pay $6 to $10 per hour." The same article quoted Rick Nelson, president of Corporation Express, an office supply company in Jessup: "There are a

lot of good people [in cities] that are looking for a chance at a good job and we've got a job for them. They just can't get here."

Linking Residents With Jobs

The Baltimore Metropolitan Council has reported that 38.3% of Baltimore City households have no automobile compared to 6.3% of county households. Nearly three-fourths of city households have only one car or less, compared to one-third of county households, making the prospect of commuting to a job outside of the city a more difficult task for city residents who also face more difficulties in utilizing public transit for reverse commuting.

A study by the Morgan State University Center for Transportation Studies concluded that public transit access to suburban activity centers from several areas of Baltimore City is poor and that the availability of reverse commute options is severely limited. According to the study, public transit travel time for reverse commutes from Baltimore City to the suburbs is often significantly longer than for commutes from the suburbs to the Central Business District. Many low-wage, unemployed city residents interviewed were unwilling to commute to suburban jobs or perceived the automobile as necessary for the reverse commute. Finally, of over 500 low-wage, unemployed city residents interviewed, approximately 70% did not own an automobile.

By any measure, Baltimore's response to the metropolitan employment mismatch has been disappointing. In 1991-92, the Greater Baltimore Committee (GBC) joined forces with BUILD and Westinghouse to recruit and transport workers from Cherry Hill to jobs at Westinghouse in Linthicum. Unfortunately, the program was slow to evolve and was eventually abandoned when Westinghouse began to downsize. T. Rowe Price abandoned a reverse commute program that it had established with Mass Transit Administration (MTA) to bring workers to Owings Mills due to low ridership.

Most recently, the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition is seeking funding for a proposal to link residents in East Baltimore with jobs in the suburbs. Other opportunities may emerge in response to the Clean Air Act which was enacted to encourage employers to actively decrease the number of single occupancy automobile commuters.

With Maryland's implementation of the Employee Commute Options Program (i.e., Clean Air regulations) originally scheduled to begin by November 1995, a directive by the Governor has placed the entire project on hold until the Environmental Protection Agency can evaluate the policy at a national level. Despite this delay and other recent dilutions in the regulations which limit compliance to the summer months and prevent prosecution of companies who are unable to meet desired levels given that a "good-faith" effort is made, many employers are already considering and initiating new commuting alternatives. Employer options range from van pools and transit subsidies to telecommuting and compressed work weeks.

Mass Transit Administration

In 1990, the MTA received $612,000 in federal and state funds to develop a reverse commuting program. The program, "Access to Jobs," was designed to help employers get employees to suburban job sites. A second goal was to encourage small, private companies to institute van service in areas where there is a perceived gap in public service by giving them seed money.

Acting as a broker, the MTA registered interested transit operators (based on several eligibility requirements) as possible service providers. The transportation operator applied for a grant based on the distance and frequency of the route. When approved, a two year grant provided a $.66 per mile subsidy the first year and a $.34 per mile subsidy the second year. As this subsidy only covered 40%-50% of the actual operating costs the first year and approximately 20%-25% of second year costs, fares, employer subsidies, and/or other grants were necessary.

Of the three routes initiated by the grant, one was unable to be sustained after original funding expired (Johns Hopkins University Hospital to Franklin Square in Baltimore County), and two have since become self-sufficient (Dundalk to Fort Howard and Meade Village to Glen Burnie Light Rail). The two lines transport approximately 175 riders per day. Although $350,000 in funds from the grant are available through 1997, interest has been limited because, according to Project Manager Simon Taylor, employers have been very reluctant to contribute to operating costs that are often necessary to make the routes financially viable.

MTA's program requires reverse commute lines to operate at a level of 50-60% operating ratio in the first year; 75-80% in the second year; and fully self sustaining thereafter. Mr. Taylor says that grant regulations, union rules, and budget constraints prevent MTA from offering similar subsidies to reverse commute lines.

Reverse Commute Solutions

A variety of reverse commuting programs — operating in St. Louis, Detroit, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and Chicago — now address the employment mismatch facing metropolitan areas. Some of the programs are run by non-profit entities or employers to help city residents to access jobs in the suburbs while others are established by public transit agencies. A few programs were developed to help unemployed residents purchase cars.

Recently, for example, Anne Arundel County Executive John Gary announced the development of a new program to provide cars to unemployed county residents. The program, "Wheels to Work," will accept donated cars from the public and from the county car fleet and sell them to unemployed residents for a modest fee. In return,

county residents must use the cars to commute to jobs. This program is one of a number established throughout the country to help unemployed residents purchase or lease cars. Automobile lease/purchase programs can serve as a particularly good model for reverse commute initiatives. The automobile programs have some promising results:

It appears that automobile lease/purchase programs are worth investigating as a model for reverse commuting because, while the scale may be small, the programs require less subsidy per commuter than many of the community-based reverse commute programs.

Findings / Models

A number of reverse commute programs exist throughout the country, including public transit programs, community-based initiatives and automobile ownership programs. An analysis of several programs found the following:

- State and local governments are important players within the reverse commuter programs studied, with commensurate influence in creating public policy affecting the programs.
- Employers are involved in a number of reverse commute programs, indicating that the private sector can play a supportive role.
- A number of reverse commute programs have obtained support beyond state and local government.
- Although there is a wide range in the amount that is charged for passenger fares, reverse commuters have demonstrated a willingness to pay a premium for direct service – inner city to suburb.
- There is a range of operating costs, reflecting in part the fact that efficiencies can be achieved when vans or automobiles are donated (as opposed to leased); when overhead expenses can be shared with other entities or programs (instead of being borne alone); and/or, when full utility of vehicles can be achieved.
- None of the programs can be described as self sufficient in the sense that passenger fares are able to cover all operating costs. However, few if any transportation systems in the United States operate without some level of public subsidy.
- Although there is a range of daily ridership among the programs, several have been able to achieve significant scale.
- There is evidence to indicate that financial and ridership outcomes are not necessarily related to the program's goals or ancillary services offered. Those programs that provide only transportation are just as successful, if not more so, than those that combine transportation with training activities.
- The average annual subsidy per commuter required for each of the different types of reverse commute programs compares favorably to other programs subsidized by the public sector. With annual subsidies ranging on average from $572 to $1,843 per person, reverse commuting compares favorably with the public subsidies required for job training, unemployment, welfare, and economic development incentives. Overall, public transit and auto related reverse commute programs appear to require the least amount of subsidy per commuter.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Baltimore has the key ingredients necessary for a successful reverse commuting program: Suburban job growth, severe inner city unemployment; poor region-wide reverse commuting public transit; and low car ownership among city residents.

Several models are available to replicate including public transit programs, community-based efforts and automobile lease/purchase programs.

The annual subsidy required to support a reverse commuter compares favorably with the costs of funding other socio/economic initiatives, including: a traditional mass transit commuter; a job training program participant; an average unemployed individual; or a single female-headed household of three on public assistance.

To move the concept of reverse commuting forward for Baltimore, public and private sector leaders in the city and state should consider the following recommendations:

MTA should re-examine its policies, programs, and commitments to reverse commuting with an eye toward expanding its involvement. Other public transit agencies throughout the country have demonstrated their commitment to and success with reverse commute programs.

State leaders should investigate ways to assist communities and MTA in their efforts to establish and support reverse commute programs. City and state employment agencies tend to view reverse commuting programs as transportation initiatives beyond their scope; state transportation agencies are typically bound by ridership formulas, funding constraints, and organizational structures that often make it difficult for them to take an active role in developing reverse commute programs. Ideally, some combination of leadership representing MTA, the City of Baltimore, community groups and employers should move the effort forward. Since the state will realize benefits from reverse commuting beyond transportation, state leaders should find ways to fund reverse commute programs that go beyond the Mass Transit Administration.

The state should consider supporting community-based programs that may emerge. Community-based assistance should be in the form of annual operational support, since capital grants and start-up funds are easier for community groups to obtain. Many programs are able to

scrape together donations for vehicles and equipment or find organizations willing to share overhead, but the annual costs of maintenance, driver salaries, fuel and coordination are often difficult to cover through passenger fares on a consistent basis.

The state should consider establishing a tax credit to encourage employer support for reverse commuting. The state could consider developing a tax credit or abatement for any suburban business that subsidizes the transportation of any low-income city worker. This policy would help to equalize the years of state and federal subsidies that have encouraged middle-class suburbanization.

Employers should consider subsidizing reverse commuters in an amount equal to the annual subsidies that they pay to subsidize parking spaces. Transportation allowances to employees who commute from the inner city would make a significant contribution to reverse commute efforts. Other possible efforts include: Van pools, ride sharing, guaranteed ride-homes, and shuttles from local transit stations.

Business groups in the region should assist in initiating dialogue on the subject of reverse commuting and encourage action from state and local leaders. The BWI Business Association and the Greater Baltimore Committee are two business groups that have had an interest in this subject. They should consider taking steps to move the concept forward.

Baltimore City should consider establishing an automobile leasing program and also consider assisting with the development of community-based reverse commute programs. The city should coordinate departments to develop programs and find resources to support reverse commuting. In addition, the city should embark on an effort to coordinate, regionally, the various job placement and transportation initiatives to help jobseekers overcome jurisdictional boundaries.

Community groups with an interest in helping low-income individuals to obtain jobs should make reverse commuting an important element of their strategy. Recently, the Historic East Baltimore Community Action Coalition developed a reverse commute program to link residents in East Baltimore with jobs in Howard County. The organization awaits funding to implement the program. Other community groups should investigate ways to assist their residents in obtaining jobs outside of the city, including reverse commute options.

Private, corporate, and community foundations should consider providing grants for start-up activities and evaluations. While the federal government has often provided an important source of start-up and capital assistance for transportation projects, recent cutbacks have threatened all but the most essential public transit projects. Foundations can play an important role by making one-time grants to assist with purchase of vehicles or by funding efforts to evaluate the success of reverse commute programs.

If Congressional style welfare reform moves forward, one-half of all welfare recipients will be required to work by 2003. For Baltimore that means finding jobs for 8,900 people in a jurisdiction that lost 1,800 jobs last year.

* * *

This report has outlined a number of ways to help inner city residents access suburban jobs. The models range from van leasing to automobile ownership; the programs vary widely in scope, scale, and cost. What they share in common is the goal of helping inner-city residents to take advantage of opportunities in the job-rich suburbs.

Mark Hughes, a prominent urban geographer and Vice president of Policy Development at Public/Private Ventures in Philadelphia, presents the case for reverse commuting most persuasively:

"A mobility strategy, in which we seek to connect inner-city residents with suburban opportunities is a policy that seeks to restore the function and integrity of the inner city as a place by connecting it to the opportunities of the modern metropolis."

In Baltimore, that strategy will allow city residents to get jobs in Owings Mills, Hunt Valley, Woodlawn, Towson, Timonium and industry located in southeast and southwest Baltimore County in the same 30-minute, comfortable commute suburban residents enjoy getting to and from their jobs in Baltimore City.

The issue is important to the economy of the region, and should remain high on its agenda.

For a copy of the complete report, "Moving Forward With Reverse Commuting" write to:

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most importantly, her players—freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. "These kids are not just good athletes, they're good kids—they've learned to work hard and study hard. I have never, in 17 years, had one of my girls not score above the 700 SAT—the threshold for eligibility."

As for results, Ms. Bishop says, "Measure by how many of my girls get athletic scholarships or academic scholarships or both. With my *Doves*, year after year, better than nine out of every ten who apply for these scholarships get them, at one college or another—63 players out of 64 over 17 years! That has to be one of the best records of any high school anywhere in the country."

The Abell Foundation salutes Breezy Bishop, the leader of the flock of Western High School's high-flying *Doves*.