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Genfare links with Porterville Transit

A small, urban agency pioneers technology at the level of major metropolitan systems

By Richard Tackett



Porterville Transit was in search of an upgrade. Rather, two upgrades: more fare payment choices for passengers, and more options for passengers to quickly and conveniently pay for service.

“We really wanted an account-based smart card system, allowing passengers the convenience to manage their mobile transit wallet from their phone or a desktop, at work or from home,” says Richard Tree, transit manager for Porterville, CA. “We wanted riders to have those convenient choices rather than having to come in to the transit center to get their smart card uploaded with a new bus pass or a ticket.”

Porterville Transit, with 25 vehicles on nine routes throughout Porterville, had worked with Genfare for a few years, when the city switched from non-validating, steel fareboxes to the Odyssey farebox from Genfare. The agency was happy with that decision, but later, several public planning meetings (which included students from the nearby Porterville College) indicated to officials that riders wanted more options.

“Many parents of students wanted a more convenient way to buy bus passes for their children,” Tree says. “They didn’t want to reload their cards at a transit center. They wanted it all online – and on their mobile devices.”



Pictured left to right: Gary Hendrickson, Robert Tree, Richard Tree, Jacob Bedolla.

Furthermore, Porterville received many comments about the standard, non-account based smart cards – specifically, if a card malfunctioned, the agency had no way of accounting for any money that a rider had loaded onto the card. The agency was taking riders at their word as a customer service *method*, but it was clear they needed more accountability with their smart card system.

Thinking bigger

Though Porterville Transit is a small, urban agency, public officials have always been extremely forward-thinking about transit technology. Tree says the agency has always strived to offer similar services to California counterparts LA Metro and the San Francisco Muni, aggressively pursuing and implementing automated voice announcements, real-time passenger information, HD monitors at transit centers and more.

“I actually reached out to numerous larger fare collection providers,” Tree says, “Many times I didn’t even get a return call, because we’re not large enough.”

Tree says Porterville was drawn to Genfare because of the company’s focus on every size of agency. The city released an RFP in April 2015, calling for an avenue for riders to be able to recharge smart cards over the internet. Genfare responded with a product demonstration in June. The city awarded the contract to Genfare by July.

A phased rollout

Phase one of the new project began immediately, with Genfare switching out its older Odyssey fareboxes and replacing them with faster Fast Fare models. The recently completed second phase involves deploying mobile ticketing for all riders, allowing riders to use their smartphones to buy and validate fares. The third phase, currently underway, will add ticket vending machines to Porterville’s transfer facility.

Porterville fares go mobile

Genfare partnered with CooCoo, Inc., a mobile ticketing provider, in an exclusive contract to develop Porterville’s new mobile ticketing app.

Genfare and CooCoo met with Richard Tree and his team for an interview about the parameters of the app. The app is currently in a controlled pilot phase. When launched, however, it will be connected with Porterville’s automatic vehicle location (AVL) technology, so that riders can go to a single application to pay for fares and access real-time passenger information.

“I give Porterville a lot of credit for looking into the future and really making the commitment to electronic validation,” says Ryan Thompson, founder and president of CooCoo. “The ability to actually scan a smartphone with the farebox offers the agency an end-to-end secure solution.”

A link to the future

The final phase will represent the biggest undertaking of the blossoming partnership: Genfare Link installation. Genfare Link



The new Porterville Transit app allows riders to buy and validate fares as well as quickly access real-time passenger information.

accepts many forms of media, including smart cards, magnetic cards, mobile tickets and smartphones. Better still, it’s all maintained on the cloud – so Porterville employees will be able to manage fares and customer service using an online interface.

In the past, Genfare technicians had to physically go on site to manually service the fareboxes and update software. With Genfare Link, Genfare created a management service that now quickly pushes software updates to the fareboxes via the cloud. These new tools also include intuitive dashboards that provide customers with real-time insights into ridership, revenue, and maintenance monitoring.

The modular design of Genfare Link provides transit agencies with functionality appropriate to their needs, from agencies operating complex multimodal systems with thousands of vehicles to small regional providers with a few dozen buses – like Porterville.

“Another major benefit of the Genfare Link portal is that Porterville can manage its social partners,” says Mark Mahon, director of sales, western region, at Genfare. “Hospitals and universities, which often distribute their own fare passes to employees, can access the platform and manage their own card balances. This saves the Porterville staff a lot of time and effort.”

Genfare Link will also connect fare data with GPS data. The farebox actively “knows” its own location, so the agency

will know which stops are collecting the most fares.

“GPS location was a central part of our initial RFP,” Tree says. “We needed to know where our transactions were taking place so we could better validate our reporting.”

The pilot tests

Thus far, Porterville has used internal staff and select riders to test its new fareboxes and mobile applications.

The farebox is much quicker than previous models when processing coins and dollar bills. The color screen has proven popular with test riders, providing an interface with the Porterville Transit logo and information about the vehicle’s current route.

“Sometimes customers see a bus coming and just get onboard, even though it might not be the bus they were waiting for,” Tree says. “Now customers have an extra reminder. They like that.”

The farebox’s display languages are in both English and Spanish, which is especially helpful because the majority of Porterville’s population is Hispanic.

Jacob Bedolla, technology specialist at Porterville Transit, has been one of the staff members testing the new system. He says that riders will often see him using the mobile ticketing app and become curious.

“They tend to ask me where they can get the app,” he says. “They recognize that a virtual wallet would expedite their boarding process. It’s creating some buzz, and even the drivers are being asked by the public about the upcoming mobile app.”



Officials say riders and drivers are “buzzing” about Porterville’s new mobile ticketing app and the upcoming Genfare Link installation.

Genfare representatives provided hands-on operator training for Porterville when switching out the Odyssey units for the new Fast Fare fareboxes; however, the transition was relatively seamless. More extensive training was required for back-end staff that will need to generate reports from the new mobile ticketing app. Training on Genfare Link will be most extensive, lasting a full week on-site.

Extensive, hands-on maintenance training often occurs at the Genfare factory in Elk Grove Village, IL. There, agency technicians are trained by skilled engineers to adjust, install and replace components on working Genfare fareboxes.

The future is bright

As recently as 10 years ago, Tree says that Porterville Transit was inundated with questions about information: Where is my bus? How do I pay for it? He says that many passengers were unwilling to give transit a chance, simply because of insufficient information.

In the last three years, since adding these new technologies, Porterville has realized a 15 percent increase in ridership despite neighboring agencies all seeing decreases.

“Now our riders have information at every bus stop,” Tree says. “Soon they’ll have it on every smartphone. Coupled with APC, riders will even be able to see how full each bus is. We’ve removed barriers to access transit in Porterville and our community is reaping the benefits.” **BR**



Porterville Transit operates 26 vehicles on nine routes.