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With the help of Genfare, this Illinois agency upgraded from a manually-operated farebox to a breakthrough fare collection solution

*By Richard Tackett*

Andrew Johnson, general manager of Connect Transit, Normal, IL, knew his agency needed a fare collection makeover. Though on-board metal fareboxes had served reliably since the agency's inception in 1972, they were out-of-date in the new millennium and some were too old to even be replaced with similar models.

"We had a manual farebox collection system," Johnson says. "For whatever reason, the agency had never gone down the route of electronic fare collection, which has been in place in other systems for decades."

The issue became readily apparent when Connect Transit took delivery of brand new, state-of-the-art New Flyer buses – and Connect Transit maintenance technicians had to install the old, metal fareboxes. To Johnson, the disparity of technology was too much.

A new fare collection system was crucial. For Johnson and Connect Transit, the next question was how far into the future were they willing to upgrade?

"How far ahead were we going to go?" Johnson asks rhetorically. "Would it be a system that would ease us into higher technology, or would it be a full mobile ticketing system with next-level capabilities?"

After some internal deliberation between those two paths, the Connect Transit team chose the latter.

Given the demographics that Connect Transit serves, the mobile component was a no-brainer. As much as 35 percent of the agency's ridership is students from nearby Illinois State University, Illinois Wesleyan University, Lincoln College and Heartland Community College.

"We definitely needed the mobile technology," Johnson says. "Students all work on smartphones and, frankly, we were worried that the community wasn't getting the full use of their local transit system. We have such a large student population – and our population as a whole is definitely affluent. We felt that going the extra step toward mobile ticketing was a solid idea."

**On the hunt**

The Connect Transit team, knowing they were seeking a full suite, mobile ticketing service, began working on specifications.

"We really feel that mobile ticketing is the next wave beyond smartcards," says Isaac Thorne, chief operating officer at Connect Transit. "We worked a lot on the specifications for that, trying to make them as broad as possible. We wanted as many vendors as possible to offer their solutions."

The bid and procurement process took between six and eight months, with the Connect Transit team asking each vendor a number of questions – all to arrive at the best possible solution for the agency's specifications. Of three finalists, Connect Transit selected Genfare to fulfill the request.

"It was a process, and while it took a while, it worked best for the transit system," Johnson says. "It produced the best results, fulfilled all of our requirements on the specifications and, on top of that, came in at a very good price."

### The Fast Fare® system

Genfare began the process of implementing their patented Fast Fare fareboxes on Connect Transit's entire fleet.

The Fast Fare combines traditional fare media with emerging technology, providing the flexibility to expand as new technology becomes available. It provides seamless integration with the eFare® cloud-based self-service rider portal and mobile ticketing, and its reliability and ease-of-maintenance minimize repair time and maximize uptime.

The system accepts mobile payments, smart cards, magnetic cards and cash.

### System training

From Genfare's standpoint, training was executed in phases. Initially, training involved working the pass system and the marketing associated with it. As the agency came closer to implementation, Genfare introduced the agency to its new equipment and talked about how different customer audiences might use it.

From there, Genfare conducted more formal "train the trainer" sessions with select members of the Connect Transit team. First, Genfare requested that department leads and chief staff undergo system training so that they could then train their respective teams. A group of drivers was also included in the session, so that they could "sell" other drivers on the new system's ease-of-use.

Genfare's system support and sales teams conducted separate training with the back-office staff, so that they could utilize all of the system's unique reports, thereby making the most of their data.

"We installed the equipment into the fleet. As a result, there was a bit of on-the-job training that we were able to do there – like for the movement of money from the bus to the vault," says Larry Chefalo, director of sales, Central Region, for Genfare. "Shortly thereafter we conducted a more formal series of training sessions centered around computer system operations. Once the data starts coming in – how does the agency access it, what does it mean and how is it used to audit?"

"That was a big deal and we are lucky enough, even as a small system, to have a dedicated I.T. and finance staff," Johnson says. "If you don't make use of that back-end information and everything that it can provide your system, then you're really short-changing yourself."

Training for the maintenance staff occurred at Genfare's factory in Elk Grove Village, IL.

Public training was even a factor, Johnson says. It started with many posts across social media, as well as many other traditional promotional tactics – postings on the bus, in the terminal and around the community. From there, public demonstrations of the system were held at various community events. ▶▶

the farebox provides a binary access point for all passengers. Many agencies and drivers take this for granted, but it's a major change for drivers who have been operating manual fareboxes for decades.

"The farebox protects the drivers because they're no longer personally responsible for fare enforcement," Chefalo says. "They follow the prompts of the equipment and the passenger receives the same information that the driver does. The driver becomes more of an ambassador than a cop."

### Long-term benefits

Chefalo says that Connect Transit's fully electronic system allows for a much stronger audit trail, a higher level of security and less handling of cash fares.

"We find that, when agencies transition from manual systems to Genfare systems, agency fare revenues increase between 3 percent and 17 percent, depending on the transit authority," he says. "The system begins to pay for itself because of increased compliance and reduced fare evasion."

Johnson and Thorne say that the biggest benefit to Connect Transit has been in data collection and analysis. This was a major sticking point in their initial interviews with various vendors, and the agency is making full use of what Genfare has provided.

"Every agency is a little bit different, but I want to see all kinds of different reports," Thorne says. "It might just be a one-time report that I may never use again. That's what we loved about Genfare's system – if we have an idea about how we want to see certain sets of data, we can pull that information out of the farebox data collection system."

Early on in the relationship with Genfare, Connect Transit actually hired a data management specialist. They knew they'd have a multitude of data sets to work with once the new system was in service, so it helps to have a dedicated staff member whose only job is to generate analytical reports.

This has greatly improved reporting to Connect Transit's Board of Directors.

"We practice complete transparency," Johnson says. "We provide our board with the general overview of what's going on, and then we really drill into topics that the board wants to know more about."

Genfare's system also links with Connect Transit's third-party systems. Johnson says this allows agency staff to use their systems as a "one-stop shop," saving valuable time and resources. Furthermore, the Fast-Fare system accepts information from the vehicle location system – and then provides GPS coordinates for all transactions.

### The future is now

Johnson sees the new system as opening up a lot of opportunity for Connect Transit and its riders.

"The name of the game in public transportation is convenience," he says. "Convenience covers everything from on-time buses to safe, reliable service. In 2016, people don't want to hassle with complicated fare structures."

"For our community," he continues, "this system will eventually open up a new level of convenience for our customers – where they don't worry about how to pay for their ride. They're still paying attention to where their bus is going and they're giving us feedback on that, but we've taken the major barrier away."

As Connect Transit moves into the final phase of implementing its fare collection solution, the agency's team will be focusing on Genfare Link™.

Genfare Link is a cloud-based, fully-integrated digital solution that the company says will deliver total control to Connect Transit, allowing the agency to manage every aspect of the fare collection process. With the goal of improving rider satisfaction and convenience, Genfare Link will provide Connect Transit with a single source for completely controlling fare management.

"Public demos are critical for any system considering an upgrade of this scale," he says. "We have a 'demonstrator' farebox which we took all around the community, where people could actually put their hands on it."

Thanks to those demonstrations, Johnson says, Connect Transit riders have adapted to the system with little difficulty.

### Positive feedback

As soon as Genfare and Connect Transit finished implementing the new system in June 2016, the public's reaction was instantaneously positive.

"The feedback we've heard so far from the public is that they love it, though it was obviously a lot different from what they've been used to," Thorne says.

Johnson and Thorne say riders are particularly excited for the ability to use their mobile phones, which as of this writing has not yet been fully deployed. *[Editor's Note: Connect Transit plans to deploy mobile payments in early 2017]*

Drivers have been particularly impressed with how the farebox has improved their work experience. They're no longer viewed as an authoritative force who's denying someone access to the bus – rather,