

Sitka Tribe of Alaska Works with Local Government to Improve Roadways for Transit Use

The Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA), which comprises approximately 20 percent of the population in Sitka's unified city-borough, interacts and cooperates regularly with the City and Borough of Sitka (CBS). The relationship between the two governments has been steadily building over the past several decades. Each month, representatives from the STA and CBS staff meet to provide updates on various tribal projects and programs. As the STA developed a transit system for Sitka, it partnered with CBS on multiple tasks and projects to improve transit accessibility for all community members.

A Framework for Collaboration

The CBS and the STA signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in the 1990s that established a framework for collaboration between the local government and the Tribe. The MOU guides the CBS assembly in making decisions related to Tribal projects and agreements, and identifies Tribal and municipal liaisons to facilitate routine communication



The CBS funded the delivery of a new bus to Sitka for the expansion of "the RIDE" (Courtesy of the STA)

between the two governments. In addition to the MOU, the CBS and the STA develop a memorandum of agreement (MOA) for each individual project that the local government and the Tribe jointly construct. Each MOA implements the principles of the MOU on a project-by-project basis.

In recent years, the STA has partnered with local agencies and organizations to develop "the RIDE", a fixed-route bus transit system within the city of Sitka. While the STA funds and operates "the RIDE" without direct involvement from the CBS, the CBS supports STA transportation construction projects by partnering with the Tribe to implement roadway projects that improve transit's roads and access.

"The RIDE"

In 2002, the Center for Community

(CFC), a provider of community-based services for residents with mobility needs in Alaska, issued a request for proposals (RFP) to provide a fixed-route transit system for Tribal and non-Tribal residents in Sitka. Recognizing that nearly 15 percent of local Tribal resident households do not have personal vehicles, the STA responded to the RFP and CFC awarded the project to the STA to improve mobility options for Tribal residents, creating "the RIDE." "The RIDE" opened in 2002 and initially consisted of two routes (the Blue line and the Red line), carrying an average of 55 people each day. Operation of the system is supported by Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5311(f) funding and FTA Formula Grants for Other than Urbanized Areas, administered through the CFC and contracted to the STA.

In 2007, the STA received a Tribal Transit Program Grant (Section

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5311[c]) to expand “the RIDE,” adding a third fixed route. This route, the Green Line, improves transit access for many Tribal residents by connecting Tribal housing, medical, and educational facilities to downtown Sitka. Since the addition of the Green Line, ridership on “the RIDE” has grown to about 320 riders daily.

“The RIDE” is the only fixed route transit service in Sitka, and both Tribal and nontribal residents utilize the service. While the CBS was not a major player in the planning and funding of “the RIDE”, the CBS funded the freight delivery of a new bus to the STA for “the RIDE” and the installation of new bus stop signage.

The transportation manager for the STA and municipal engineer for the CBS regularly meet to discuss improvements to “the RIDE” and road projects that impact “the RIDE” service area. Though the governments are not always formally involved in each other’s transportation projects, there is a high level of collaboration and information-sharing between them. The STA and CBS possess a mutual respect for the work of each agency, and their regular communication allows for consideration of each other’s priorities and needs. Recently, the Sitka Public Works Department has coordinated with the STA on several local road projects linked to “the

RIDE,” improving its ability to serve all residents.

Indian River Trailhead Project

The CBS and the STA are currently coordinating to make transit and parking improvements at the Indian River Trailhead. “The RIDE” provides transit service along Indian River Road and has a bus stop a few hundred feet from the road’s terminus at the Indian River Trailhead, which provides access to the Indian River walking trail and has an unmaintained city-owned gravel parking lot. The trailhead is adjacent to an STA Tribal housing authority development. The STA sought to improve access to and use of the Indian River Trail and nearby transit facilities by shifting the bus stop to the trailhead and then improving this facility. The STA partnered with CBS to pave the parking area and install a new bus turnaround, bus shelter, bus pullout at the trailhead.

The STA and the Sitka Public Works Department developed an MOA for the project. The MOA states that the STA is responsible for funding and contracting the design and construction of the trailhead and bus pullout, and the Public Works Department will cooperate with the STA to allow the Tribe to complete this work on CBS-owned land. The Public Works Department will also participate in

the review of the project’s design to ensure that it meets CBS’ standards. Design for the Indian River Trailhead is nearly complete, and the STA plans to release an RFP to improve the trailhead and install the bus shelter and pullout by spring of 2013.

Benefits of Collaboration

The partnerships the STA has established with the Sitka Public Works Department and CBS assemblies function effectively because the partners communicate regularly and work together to address their independent and sometimes mutual needs. Collaboration between the STA and the local government to complete Tribe-funded projects related to “The RIDE” benefit the entire community, as these improvements have increased the transit system’s accessibility for Tribal and non-Tribal Sitka residents alike.

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