

## Why transit reform succeeded in Baton Rouge



On Saturday, April 21st, 2012, the citizens of Baton Rouge and Baker passed a historic election to create a dedicated revenue source for public transit. You can read about the results in The Advocate [here](#).

As we have said time and again, our work did not end on April 21st. We now begin the long, hard work of holding CATS accountable for every dollar of taxpayer money and making sure they implement the transit reform plan fully and on time. (The Accountability Report Card, which now takes on a new level of importance, can be downloaded [here](#).)

But this was a truly historic feat -- one that many thought could not be accomplished and that succeeded despite great odds. So we want to take a moment to reflect on how this effort succeeded where so many others have failed.

Below are four reasons we think the transit campaign succeeded, followed by one thought about where we go from here.

### **Reason #1: We built relationships and trust**

The paralysis that so often prevents us from tackling difficult issues in our community has its basis, in part, in a deep distrust of government (often for good reason), which is one of the defining realities of the political age in which we live. But behind that, our paralysis also can be driven by another, more troubling form of distrust -- a distrust of each other, especially across racial lines.

Starting more than three years ago, when Together Baton Rouge began to be formed by congregations and organizations across our city-parish, we did not set out to work on public transit or on any other pre-determined issue. We set out to build relationships and listen to each others' stories. The thousands of citizens who took part in "house meetings" heard and were moved by the issues affecting each others' lives. Those stories acted on us. They changed us. They guided us to work on transit and the other issues we are currently working on (education, crime, food access and healthcare).

But most of all, those stories helped build up a broader base of civic trust across racial and economic

lines, among thousands of people and hundreds of institutions. This process changed some deep-seated frameworks for how we (unconsciously to be sure) had come to define our notions of who is considered "we" and "they" in our community. It created a broader notion of "we".

The work of building trust is never done, and there is, quite evidently, much more work to be done.

But we submit that without the very broad expansion of civic trust through the work of organizing over the last three years, the transit election would not have passed.

## **Reason #2: There was a solid plan and it was citizen-driven**

Most previous efforts and election proposals have come from the top-down, from elected officials, public agencies or a small group of experts. The effort for comprehensive transit reform happened from the bottom-up. It was driven by citizens from beginning to end.

The Blue Ribbon Commission on Transit was originally proposed by Mayor-President Kip Holden, but Together Baton Rouge and the Baton Rouge Area Chamber had free reign over who was on it and how it conducted its work. The Commission was entirely citizen-led, made up of a cross-section of business, university, faith, community and non-profit leaders. They engaged elected officials, to be sure. And they drew on the knowledge of top transit experts, to develop an analysis and a plan of action that was concrete, achievable and had powerful tools to assure performance and accountability.

So it was a rock-solid plan for reform. But it was also a citizens' plan. We believe that changed the openness with which other citizens received it and the enthusiasm with which they fought to have it succeed.

## **Reason #3: We did more than 120 "civic academies"**

Between January and April, citizen leaders with Together Baton Rouge and the Baton Rouge Transit Coalition conducted educational sessions about transit reform on a quite astonishing scale. More than 120 of these "civic academies" were held with the membership of more than 160 organizations, congregations, universities, businesses, hospitals and non-profit organizations. Some 5,000 people attended them. As those attendees can attest, these were not cheer-leading sessions for the plan. They contained detailed, even sometimes mundane, information about how desperately our transit system is under-funded compared to other cities, about how other cities with robust transit systems have gone about creating stable revenue and governance structures, about what, precisely, the plan would do and how we can hold CATS accountable for performance and results.

As the sessions proceeded, we saw a transformation taking place across this community. Suddenly, everyone was talking about transit. On blogs and in comment sections of newspapers (usually the domain of know-nothing, ideological impressionism), detailed debates sprung up, with people citing per capita transit funding levels, governance best practices and linking to the [Transit Reform presentation](#). That presentation was downloaded online by more than 3,000 people, and we heard about people taking it on their own into their communities to share its analysis of how our transit system had become the dismal wreck of a system it had become and what could be done to change it.

TBR leader Dianne Hanley put it well in The Advocate on Sunday: "When people are educated, they make good decisions."

And so, we believe, they did. But without that unprecedented campaign of civic education, the transit election would not have passed.

## **Reason #4: We organized voters**

Even with everything described above, the election itself would still come down to two basic questions: who would vote and how would they vote?

In the thirty days before the election, an extraordinary group of more than 600 citizen leaders took on the task of voter outreach. They canvassed door-to-door four Saturdays in a row. They knocked on the doors of 29,000 voters and received "pledge to vote" cards from more than 9,000 of them. They put up 5,000 "Save Transit" yard signs. They phone banked night after night.

And on election day, they did all of it again.

The results were quite extraordinary. Turnout for a single-item tax election was expected to be between 12 and 15%. Instead, it was 26%. And in an extremely uncommon turn, voters in low-income areas, which historically have the highest levels of voter apathy and disaffection, voted at almost the same rates as higher-income areas.

Support, furthermore, was far more broadly spread than opposition. The 50 most supportive precincts gave the measure an average "yes" vote of 90%, while the 50 least supportive precincts still voted 25% in favor. It was a winning combination.

So that, we believe, was the recipe for success: building trust, a citizen-driven plan, broad-based education and voter organizing.

### **So where do we go from here on transit reform?**

There were, of course, many who did not support the April 21st election. We disagreed with that position, but we also are convinced that people on both sides voted out of their sincere belief about what is best for our community.

But with the election behind us, it seems now that there is a common interest that should unite everyone in our community, regardless of where they stood on the election -- the interest in assuring that our tax dollars are well spent, by having the transit reform plan implemented on time, as promised and on budget.

This, we submit, is the task before all of us, and we look forward to working on it ... together.

Faithfully,  
Together Baton Rouge  
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