

# a better mousetrap

PROFILE OF CHRIS TOMLINSON,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF GEORGIA REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION  
AUTHORITY (GRTA) & THE STATE ROAD AND TOLLWAY AUTHORITY  
(SRTA) IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

*Interview location: Taco Mac in Atlanta, Georgia.*

*How we got there: By MARTA train*

*In one word, he describes himself as “Motivated.”*

*By Laura Lee Huttenbach*



Chris Tomlinson, in front of the GRTA fleet, in 2016. (Photo credit Mary Beth Koeth.)

“What’s GRTA?”

That’s the most common reaction

Chris Tomlinson gets when he tells

people that he works for the Georgia

Regional Transportation Authority.

In the world of Atlanta transporta-

tion, GRTA (pronounced “Greta”)

is often overshadowed by MARTA,

its more recognizable counterpart.

In fact, many residents don’t realize

that GRTA exists. >

# create an ecosystem

---

I used to be one of those people. Though I was born and raised here, I first learned of GRTA in March 2016, when I listened to a panel on Transportation Leadership that featured Chris, GRTA's Executive Director, and Keith Parker, the CEO of MARTA.

Today I'm in Chris's office at GRTA Headquarters in Downtown Atlanta, and I remark that Chris and Keith appeared to have a friendly rapport. "I didn't get the sense that there was a rivalry," I say.

"Not at all," says Chris. "I think the average person, Joe Public, doesn't really care what the agency is. They just want to get from Point A to Point B. So it's not a rivalry, it's complementary, and I guess that's a good place to start." GRTA, Chris explains, is a state-level agency that provides express bus service departing from park-and-rides in twelve different counties. The buses take riders to major work, play, and living centers in Downtown, Midtown, and Perimeter (a region in northeast Atlanta). The fleet of 166 buses runs 33 routes, carrying about 9,000 people per day.

Chris continues, "The key reason I bring up we are a state-level agency is because we



Chris Tomlinson. (Photo credit Mary Beth Koeth.)

have the ability to establish transit across county jurisdictional lines." This is unlike the three other major transit operators in and around Atlanta: MARTA, which is in three counties, Gwinnett County Transit and Cobb Community Transit, whose service is also restricted. GRTA, he hopes, will be the link between these independent agencies. Chris's goal is to create an ecosystem where all the agencies work together with the sole purpose of getting people where they need to go.

"Today is going to be my first time riding on GRTA," I say, assuming that we will take his service when we go to lunch.

"Actually," says Chris, "We're going to take MARTA." GRTA, he tells me, is focused on reducing

congestion during the morning and evening rush hour commutes, so it doesn't operate in the middle of the workday. "If we wanted to take GRTA," he says, "we would've had to do a breakfast meeting."

Chris tells me that he tries to ride GRTA's Xpress buses as often as he can, though the evening bus schedule that stops running at six isn't conducive to the late hours he keeps at the office. "But my staff can tell when I'm on the bus in the morning," he says, smiling. "Because they see the emails flying at a time when I normally have to be off the phone. I don't know if they're always happy about that."

First-time Xpress passengers always comment on how comfortable the experience is; buses are quiet, clean and equipped with outlets and free

***The average person, Joe Public, doesn't really care what the agency is. They just want to get from Point A to Point B.***

WiFi. "My challenge" says Chris, "is: how do we introduce more people to the experience?"

Chris and I head to the Peachtree Center MARTA station, which is ten stories underground, directly below the office. On the way, Chris asks me, "So how did you get here today?"

I wince. "I drove," I say apologetically.

In a non-condescending way, Chris shakes his head. "Did you hear how you said that—I *drove*," he says, wrinkling his nose in a quick impression of me. "This is my personal theory," he says, and tells me that most people think that the only way to use public transit is to use it all the time. Chris likens this reasoning to a person who wants to get in shape but doesn't join a gym because he doesn't want to spend all his time in one. "Instead of just doing a little bit each day, they won't do it until they're fully committed," says Chris. "So I don't shy away from the fact that I drive. Sometimes I'll drive and use transit to get around during the day. I can do both." Drivers of cars and users of public transit, by his reckoning, aren't mutually exclusive.

"My cringe," I explain, "was how foolish I felt driving up eight floors of the parking deck and paying eighteen dollars knowing that I live less than two miles away."

"So that's the other interesting thing about Atlanta and transit," Chris says, as we step onto the long escalator that takes us underground to the station entrance. "That is high—eighteen dollars—but if you look at an equivalent metro city, the cost of parking might be so high that



you would never even think about driving. Atlanta isn't quite there yet. But I submit that even if the cost of parking and all that isn't as high as other cities, the trajectory we're on with attracting companies such as Mercedes and State Farm—we can't continue our economic development efforts and not address transit and transportation."

To people who are in favor of the status quo when it comes to transportation options in Atlanta, Chris wants to say, "Well look around, because this traffic is as good as it gets. It's only going to get worse." He says it's not a sustainable model. "Companies will stop coming if it gets worse," he says. "If we don't do something about the transit and transportation, then we should stop the economic development pursuits. They have to go hand-in-hand."

As Chris taps his well-used Breeze Card at the fare box, I notice his picture is on the back as a MARTA Board Member. He also shows me his GRTA card, an Xpress ten-ride pass. "This is another one of my projects that I want to work on," he says, explaining that he wants to

integrate the systems and use only a Breeze Card. Eventually, he wants fares to be deducted from smartphone accounts. "You can forget your Breeze Card," says Chris, "But you're probably not going to forget your phone." We reach the platform the minute our northbound train pulls up. "Look at this timing!" says Chris.

"I know," I say. "Did you call ahead?"

"I did not," he says. "I didn't look at the schedule. But it gets back to what I'm saying about bus service. This is exactly what I want to happen." Meaning that, with high frequency service, passengers shouldn't need to know the schedule. "But with our service now, our buses run every 30 minutes," he continues, stepping on the train. If a customer doesn't time it right, he or she could be waiting a long 29 minutes.

To Chris, the worst part of waiting is the uncertainty of when your bus will arrive. "Like in the morning, I arrive and by my watch it's 7:04," he says as an example. "I don't see the bus. *Is it stuck in traffic? Or did it just turn the corner before I came in?* That anxiety, I hate," he says, wiggling his shoulders in disgust. The solution to that problem, Chris explains excitedly, is a new app, myXpress, which allows passengers to see the exact location of their bus in real time and receive updates in the case of traffic or an accident. "I may not be able to prevent every accident," he says, but he can put information in the hands of customers, so they can determine when they need to arrive at their bus stop.

As we pull into the Civic Center Station, an automated announcement plays, but I'm not paying attention. "I'm not sure if you heard

***If we don't do something about the transit and transportation, then we should stop the economic development pursuits.***



Chris Tomlinson. (Photo credit Mary Beth Koeth.)

that,” says Chris, pointing to the overhead speaker. “It just said that if you’re connecting to Xpress regional bus service, this is your connecting point.” He explains why GRTA decided to make the Civic Center Station one of the main transfer points, rather than the Five Points Station, where the East-West MARTA line connects with the North-South. At Five Points, the congestion, the one-way streets, and traffic patterns all make the station a difficult location to get regional commuter buses in and out of. Chris knows that, for these reasons, the Civic Center is a better option, “but I can tell you that some people will say, ‘I can’t believe they didn’t connect at Five Points.’”

Chris is touching on a common shortcoming in any industry—sometimes, it is not the system

that is broken but the communication and understanding of that system by the average citizen. My brain—for better or worse—works differently from a transportation engineer’s, but if someone like Chris can serve as the intermediary between our minds, I will be a lot more understanding of why I can’t catch my bus at Five Points. “We put a lot of thought into all the changes,” says Chris, “but at first glance it may not make sense.”

Our train is crossing over I-85 interstate, which, at this time of day, is moving. At rush hour, the highway turns into a parking lot, and it’s a wonderfully vindicating feeling to fly by the gridlock.

We get off at the next stop, Lindbergh, and walk to lunch at Taco Mac. Along the way, Chris narrates the tour, pointing out MARTA and AT&T headquarters next to the station. “Here you have a good example of transit-oriented development,” he says, pointing to the stores, restaurants, and mid-rise condos around us. “You’ve even got a nightclub,” he says, nodding to Tongue and Groove. “Depending on where you want to live, you might never need your car.”

**A**t lunch, Chris tells me a bit about his background. He is, I should say, a fairly serious professional who tends to brush off non-work-related questions. For instance, when I ask about a hobby, he replies, “Well I like golf, but golf doesn’t like me.” Then he goes back to talking about transit.

An attorney by training and practice, he never sought out a career in public transit, though growing up in New York and Pittsburgh, he experienced first-hand how convenient it can be not to depend on a car. In New York, nobody ever had to sell him on the merits of a subway; public transit was a public good. When he moved to Atlanta in 1992, he was surprised by the city’s resistance to and negative impression of public transit. He was also “tickled,” he says, by some of the features on the MARTA trains—they had carpet, and the stations played classical music. Around the 1996 Olympics, Chris, and all of Atlanta, noticed huge improvements to the system.

Since 1998, Chris has served as General Counsel for three government agencies—the Georgia State Financing and Investment Commission, the Georgia Technology Agency, and the Georgia Department of Transportation—that all gave him helpful grounding for a future in public transit. In 2013, he became Executive Director for the State Road and Tollway Authority (SRTA), where he oversaw the implementation of the Peach Pass Lane. “Are

***When he moved to Atlanta in 1992, he was surprised by the city’s resistance to and negative impression of public transit.***

you familiar with it?” he asks. I shake my head.

The Peach Pass Lane, he explains, is an express lane stretching over 16 miles of I-85 northbound and southbound outside of 285, a “heavily congested corridor.” To use the lane, drivers have to pay a toll related to demand and traffic, though carpools and public transit vehicles are exempt from paying. To go all 16 miles, the toll has been as low as 16 cents and as high as 12 dollars.

Last year, Governor Nathan Deal called Chris and asked him to consider taking over as the



head of GRTA. “I thought he was asking if I’d be interested in switching,” recalls Chris, from SRTA to GRTA. “But he said, ‘*Not instead of*’ but *in addition to*,’ because he recognized the tie-in with our projects.” So, for the last year and a half, Chris has served as Executive Director at both SRTA and GRTA, which share an office.

of managed lanes simply comes down to this: we have limited real estate. We know we have a traffic congestion problem. Are there tools or techniques that help manage the limited resource—the limited space—so that there’s at least one lane that flows well enough for when the value of your time is higher than the price we’re charging?”



Chris Tomlinson, riding the MARTA escalator down to the Peachtree Center Station platform. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

During the morning rush hour in the Express Lane, Chris tells me, public transit vehicles make up two percent of the vehicle traffic. “But they account for 26 percent of the people moving through the lane.” He is proud of this statistic. Before criticism enters my mind, Chris, trained lawyer that he is, presents the defense. “A lot of people think that what we do with the tolls on 85 is about generating money for government, but it’s not,” he says. “This whole concept

Detractors have referred to the Express Lane as the “Lexus Lane,” implying that it only serves the rich people. But looking at statistics, Chris says, “It’s more of like a Toyota lane, a Ford lane, or a Honda Accord lane—those are some of the top vehicles.” People are more likely to splurge on the lane during their evening commute, on their way home for dinner, to their daughter’s soccer practice, or to pick their son up from daycare, which can charge parents a dollar

for every minute they're late. "People put a premium on their evenings," says Chris. Enabling people to make choices and improve their lifestyle, Chris believes, is one of the most fulfilling aspects of his job. "When we opened the lanes, that was real," he says. "Having people say, 'Because these lanes are here, I can do *x* or *y*, and I couldn't do that before. That's been nice. That's made a difference."

**T**he server brings our check as Chris is reflecting on the transition from law to public transit. "As an attorney, you're always putting out fires," he says. "In the back of your mind, you're thinking, *If you'd just come to me sooner.*" But in business and in transit, he has the privilege to be forward thinking. "Every day I'm making decisions that twelve months or two years from now can be looked at potentially as genius or foolish."

He attributes the potential success of his leadership to two factors: how well he is able to communicate the vision and how well he is able to create and delegate to a competent team. "I don't see my job as telling people how to do their jobs," he says. "Rather, set a vision. Make some key high-level decisions. And figure out how to give them the resources or remove the obstacles that are in their way of delivering." To help make his point, he quotes Steve Jobs. "We don't hire smart people to tell them what to

do. We hire smart people for them to tell us what to do."

“

***Try to do what you can to make people's jobs interesting and entertaining. They're spending literally their best waking hours with you.***

”

To coax the best out of his staff, he believes he must invest in them and help them be invested in the organization. "Everybody wants to do a good job," says Chris. "And they want to understand how what they do contributes to the bigger picture." That personal fulfillment that he gets from making people's lives better—well, he wants everyone at SRTA and GRTA to feel the same way.

"Try to do what you can to make people's jobs interesting and entertaining," suggests Chris. "They're spending literally their best waking hours with you. So at least make it interesting for them." He extends the



philosophy to encouraging employees to acquire more education and job training. “Some people worry that if you invest in people like this, they’re going to leave and go someplace else and make more money,” he says, smiling. “But the best saying I ever heard in response to, ‘What if we train them up and they leave,’ was: ‘What if we don’t and they stay?’” Chris chuckles. “Now I’m out of clichés.”

These days, Chris and his family hang out with a lot of public transit folks, which is a diverse group. (Keith Parker, the MARTA CEO whom Chris calls a “rock star,” is one of his friends.) “Can you think of some common traits that you all share in the industry?” I ask.

“A true desire to build a better mousetrap,” he says after gathering his thoughts. “There’s a lot of hoops, but there’s reasons for all of them—federal regulation and what-have-you. But everyone really wants to try and make it better. I think the opportunity to do that is at its highest, in that, it’s hard to do it in isolation ... There’s a better chance of success in working with others.” ■



Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach’s first book is “The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General” (Ohio University Press, 2015). Her website is [www.LLHuttenbach.com](http://www.LLHuttenbach.com).

---

**PEOPLE WHO  
MOVE PEOPLE**

ESSAYS ON PUBLIC  
TRANSIT AFICIONADOS

*People Who Move People* is a web series profiling individuals who have made an impact in public transit. The series has been initiated and funded by RouteMatch Software, an Atlanta-based company who is passionate about transit and proud to record these stories. Find out more at [peoplewhomovepeople.com](http://peoplewhomovepeople.com).