

# the power of the passengers

PROFILE OF SCOTT BOGREN,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE COMMUNITY  
TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA (CTAA)

*Interview location: CTAA's headquarters in Washington, D.C. and around the Capitol*

*How we got there: On foot*

*In one word, he describes himself as "Committed."*

*By Laura Lee Huttenbach*



Scott Bogren, Washington D.C. in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

If you think modern-day Americans have lost their concept of community, Scott Bogren wants you to get on a bus. From a rural town to a big city, buses are always a place to find a diverse group of people, heading to different destinations, together. Scott knows buses. In 28 years working for the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA)—where he was recently promoted to executive director—Scott has ridden buses in every state except Hawaii. >

# concept of community

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Scott and I are sitting at CTAA Headquarters in Washington, D.C., a few blocks from the White House. CTAA is a national organization with over 1,200 members and some 3,000 affiliated organizations. While “anybody operating transit is a potential member,” he tells me, their niche is in systems that serve rural and small urban areas. In return for dues, members have access to resources and training sessions. “We’re up to 100,000 drivers that have taken our passenger assistance and security training,” says Scott. CTAA also hosts an annual Expo that kicks off with the Bus Roadeo, a competition among bus operators that honors their hard work and dedication. Last year, the Expo was in Portland, Oregon—a city known for placing value on public transit.

At the Roadeo Awards Banquet, the winning driver addresses the room of 500 people. “They’re usually not used to public speaking,” says Scott, but “they say the most eloquent things. They get right to the heart of what this business means.” Considering the myriad of issues that agencies have to juggle, Scott thinks transit boils down to the driver and passenger. “If that transaction works,” says Scott, “then the business is



Scott's view from the a bus traveling around the Washington D.C. area in 2016. (Photo credit Scott Bogren.)

doing what it’s supposed to do.”

From his travels, Scott has plenty of examples of the business doing more than what it’s supposed to do. He tells me about Altran in Munising, Michigan. “That system’s making trips for dialysis patients happen in snow that’s measured by the feet,” he says. Without that ride, patients would have no way of getting to the hospital for treatment. Routinely across the country, says Scott, bus drivers will go to pick up an elderly passenger and find the person can’t come to the door. When the driver investigates, he may discover that the person has fallen and needs help. When this happens, says Scott, “they become so much more than just a driver.”



Recently, Scott was riding a bus in rural West Virginia on the way to pick up a passenger. “We went to where you don’t think anybody lives and there was somebody who needed to go to a doctor’s appointment,” he recalls. Helping the elderly man board the bus, the driver noticed his oxygen tank was too low to make the trip. “So the driver went back to his house, knew where he stored the oxygen, came back, and set it up,” says Scott, shaking his head in disbelief. “That’s a bus driver doing that. And that story, writ large, is what’s happening with our members across the country, all the time.” Scott especially likes to hear passengers saying things like “my bus” or “my driver.” There, he knows the transit system is doing good work, “because they’ve created this thing about ownership,” he says. If a driver is out sick, passengers will ask about him or her. At Christmas, drivers receive letters of gratitude with quilts and cookies.

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Often, people in big cities have trouble understanding Scott’s work. Once at a cocktail party, he remarked to another guest that he’d just come back from a transit meeting in Minot, North Dakota. “What?” the stranger replied. “They have transit there? Why?” At gatherings like this, Scott likes to ask people where they’re from. Chances are, he’s been there before and can tell them about improvements underway in the local transit system. Inevitably, says Scott, the person will reply, “Really? There’s transit in *fill-in-the-name-of-some-small-town?*”

People sometimes forget that the need for mobility affects people everywhere, and not just in cities that we can find on a map. For those who have their own transportation or easy access to a subway, mobility is an easy thing to take for granted. “You have to explain that there are plenty of people in every community that need a ride, that we’re all better as a society for making these trips,” says Scott. “At a fundamental level we’ve always believed that mobility is a basic human right. We don’t just say that. We act on it. We try to make it happen—wherever you are, whoever you are.” To him, the positive stories about transit never get old, because despite similar themes, each one is different. “No two transit agencies are alike,” he says.

One would think that after 28 years in the business, he had seen it all. “No,” Scott says. “I haven’t gotten to that point.” Still, one of his most memorable experiences happened in his first year at CTAA—in 1988, when he was hired on as an editorial assistant. “The first trip I took was to rural Central Pennsylvania,” he recalls. “This is before the internet and all these technologies,

where you routed a bus with a two-way radio and hoped that it worked.”

On this trip through the woods of rural Pennsylvania, the driver got lost and called the dispatcher. “I’ll never forget it,” says Scott. “The dispatcher said, ‘Take a right and drive down this road. Then I want you to turn left at the barking dog.’ We drove down the road and along

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came this dog at the fence line barking at us, and we turn left and the passenger was right there. I remember thinking to myself, This is cool. These are the things I want to write about.”

Everyone in D.C. is talking about subway line shutdowns, as the Metro completes some necessary system repairs. It’s made national news, too, earning a headline (“Derailed”) in May’s issue of *Time* magazine. I ask Scott if his commute will be affected. “I’m sure it will,” he says. I try to get him to admit frustration at the inconvenience, but I am unsuccessful. “Anybody who really knows the business could tell for a number of years that they hadn’t been maintaining the system as well as they could,” observes Scott. At some point, Metro had to correct itself. “And that’s what

they’re doing,” he says. “I applaud them for it. If we’re all inconvenienced a little on our trip, if that gives us a safer and better ride—then, you know.” The extra effort, he insists, is worth it.

But Scott concedes that he’s not the norm. “I understand what’s going on behind the scenes,” he says, acknowledging that not everybody has the benefits of inside information. “A lot of the typical commuters are going to be angry.” He believes that the current state of disrepair is in “direct relationship to the funding that they don’t have,” and D.C. is a microcosm of the lack of funding for transit agencies throughout the nation. “I’ve got members all across the country operating buses that are beyond what the federal government says is [the buses’] useful lives but they have no funding to replace those buses,” says Scott. “That’s a problem.” He cites a statistic estimated by the Department of Transportation that the capital required solely to take care of the equipment backlog on transit—the buses, railcars—is \$85 billion. For CTAA members, says Scott, funding is usually the biggest challenge to operating a safe and successful system.

It’s a lovely summer day, so we take our conversation outside, on a walking tour of the Capitol. As we are heading down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the White House, Scott mentions that a lot of people in Washington assume that he is a professional lobbyist for transit. In reality, that isn’t the case. “We do more education than advocacy,” he says. “We try to educate congressmen on the impact of their decisions on transit systems in their state.” I’m not sure what he means, so Scott provides some context. “You can track American history



Scott, in front of the Washington Monument in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

by transportation era,” he tells me. He cites the distinct eras: *Paths and trails. Waterways and canals. Railroads.* “Then you get into the 1940s and 1950s up until about ten years ago, and you see the era of highways,” he says. In 1956, he explains, President Eisenhower devised the Interstate Highway System “largely for defense purposes.” To pay for the roads, Eisenhower instituted a federal gas tax. “Traditionally, policy, especially here in Washington, has been designed to invest in that era,” Scott says. “But that system’s all built. In fact, some of that needs to be maintained.

“We’re living off a funding mechanism that was designed to build highways in the 1950s,” he says. “We’re living off a dinosaur.” Now the interstates are finished and “this new

era involves a lot more technology and a sharing economy ... but the funding mechanism and the policy haven’t caught up with it.”

Through the ’90s, Scott recalls, issues of roads and transit were non-partisan. “Funding roads and bridges and transit was something government was absolutely supposed to do,” he says. “If the parties were fighting, it didn’t matter. They would come together. Our stuff would pass. Beginning in the 2000s, politics superseded it.”

Now, he considers it a small miracle that the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act, aka the FAST

Act, was passed and signed into law in December 2015. The FAST Act guarantees approximately \$11 billion in federal funding for transit projects per year for the next five years. Scott recognizes that this is good news, but if previous legislation is any indicator, the government hasn't yet figured out how to fund the new transportation era. As an example, he asks me to consider the federal gas tax, which is 18.4 cents per gallon and funds the Department of Transportation. "It was set in 1993," he says, exasperated. "Well, what in our lives costs the same today as it did in 1993?"

For years, he says, Congress has been telling CTAA members, "You need to learn to do more with less." Scott shakes his head. "They've come to this point where they can't do any more with less."

Scott is an optimistic person, but I think our physical proximity to the Capitol and the White House is reminding him of legislative failures, rather than the individual transit successes that he spoke about earlier. When we return to CTAA and sit down on comfortable armchairs in the corner of the office—behind us is a white board with the quote, "A goal without a plan is just a wish"—he identifies more solutions than problems, starting with the passengers. "Millions of Americans a day ride public transit," he says. These people are the direct beneficiaries of public transit, but the industry doesn't typically hand them a microphone, and few will seek access to a microphone on their own. "If we could

harness the power of the passengers," says Scott, "have them speak loudly and get that message through, I think it would be great."

Furthermore, he wants to focus less on the number of trips that a transit agency makes and more on the world created by providing the service. "It's kind of like when you go to the doctor's," begins Scott. "The doctor's not gonna say, 'I saw this many patients today.' It's,

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'I cured this illness.' Or, 'I set this person's broken bone.'" To understand the impact of transit, Scott believes we need a way to make taxpayers who *don't* use the service feel its benefit to society. How does a person living in a city like Washington, D.C. know about the life of the old man on oxygen in rural West Virginia? Even if a bus trip to dialysis saves a life, a data collector will still only count it as one ride. "Because you still get uninformed elected officials that say, 'That transit system loses money,'" says Scott. "Because their analysis is: *We paid this much to run it, and here's how much we got back in fares.* And there's no



accounting for the other pieces that I was just talking about.”

To break through that mindset, Scott wants the data to reflect the individual success stories. “We’ve never fully been able to speak eloquently about the outcomes of those trips,” says Scott. “We have to quantify and qualify what we do

in or benefit from transit to tell their stories directly. When elected officials hear from their constituents, he says, they listen. “The lobbyists can only take you so far,” reckons Scott. “When the members are engaged in telling their stories, then we can maneuver.”

I ask for tips on leadership, but he tells



Scott, in front of the White House in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

in a much better way than we do now. If we could try to extrapolate that data, we’d really be able to prove our worth.” He’s seen the stories in “little bites, but nothing dramatic enough for someone to say, ‘Wow. Look at what this industry’s really doing with the federal investment that it gets.’”

Scott is doing his part to educate Washington on behalf of his members, but he wants to encourage the people who work

me he’s only been director for a couple of months. “Okay,” I say, “What have you learned from other leaders?”

“If you have people that share values and commitment—and we do—then a leader’s job is to allow those staff members to flourish,” he says. “To not be afraid of making mistakes. To take some reasonable risks ... I try to instill that in people here. And I’m very fortunate. I came into an

organization that's full of those kinds of people already, and people that I know and trust."

Before I head to the Metro to catch the train to the airport, Scott brings up a final subject that's on a lot of transit minds. "We have this tremendous brain drain going on in the transit field," he says. "People who launched these systems are all retiring now. But the cool thing is, they really did create something real and now this younger generation can come in [and] adapt it to data and technology."

In a half-hour, CTAA is having an all-staff meeting. One item on the agenda is a mentoring program that will pair experienced leaders, on the brink of retirement, with bright young minds who are just starting in the field. Scott shies away from using the term *millennial*, and instead refers back to those historic eras of transportation. "I do feel like the younger people will be the ones that, in the end, create this next era," he says. "There are a ton of opportunities." ■



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).

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*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](http://peoplewhomovepeople).