



COMMENTARY

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Growing and Expanding Innovative Transit Opportunities in the Wake Of the Pandemic

One thing working more than thirty years in public transit has taught me is that we're always in a state of expansion, innovation and growth to meet the changing needs of our customers.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THOUGH, CREATED challenges unlike anything many of us have ever seen. In the face of declining ridership, a shrinking workforce and sliding revenues, there is, however, a clear path toward recovery, rebuilding and thriving more than ever before. Indeed, the challenges brought by the pandemic have given all of us in this industry an opportunity to take stock, reassess and revalue to ensure we are providing meaningful and relevant services to all those who rely on us.

Indianapolis Public Transportation Corporation (IndyGo), for example, is seizing this opportunity through several strategies, including expanding our footprint to generate more efficient and equitable services while monetizing our facilities and enhancing the customer experience through innovative transit and investing in key partnerships.

First, expanding our facilities started with rightsizing our portfolio to generate maximum efficiencies. We've purchased several properties to address critical needs, including accommodating our growing electric and hybrid fleet of buses, adding an onsite operator training space, creating a separate paratransit operations facility and engaging best practices for office spacing and social distancing in this post-pandemic era.

While we work on designing our new headquarters, we've partnered with the Marion County Public Health Department to provide a large facility, with plenty of parking spaces, allowing them to administer as many as 1,000 COVID-19 vaccinations a day.

Our completed headquarters will include office space, maintenance garages, our fleet of buses and a CDL-certified training center. That center will allow IndyGo to hire more drivers at a faster rate during a time when we need them most to gear back up from COVID-19.

Additionally, the Second Chance Hiring Initiative aims to remove the barriers those with a criminal record face when seeking employment. By not looking into an applicant's criminal background until a formal offer is extended, not going back farther than seven years and using an assessment if a criminal offense is found, we're helping to improve workforce re-entry.

Breaking down barriers is a part of the innovation we are leaning into at IndyGo. With expansion being a focus, the importance of maintaining positive and diverse vendor relations cannot be overstated. We just launched a vendor development pilot program that will take small businesses through a multi-week training on how to better work with IndyGo and improve their business proposals.

The new Mobility Solutions and Customer Care Center will house IndyGo's first facility specifically dedicated to paratransit services. It will include enhanced assessment and dedicated travel training in an indoor space that will incorporate a 30-foot bus, simulated uneven pavement, grass, rocks, stairs, a bus stop shelter, a BRT station, ticket vending machines and everything necessary to help all sectors of our population learn how to ride the bus and navigate the system safely. It's the last tool we need to launch trip-by-trip eligibility.

The second piece to a comprehensive comeback strategy

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includes innovative transit mobility solutions. A cornerstone option for IndyGo includes a migration into microtransit, or real-time, dynamic, flexible routing. We're researching to see how we can use microtransit to streamline our paratransit services—cutting costs while also providing more convenience for some of our most vulnerable riders.

IndyGo recently had the opportunity to work alongside May Mobility to design and launch the Indiana University Purdue University circulator route using autonomous vehicle technology. IndyGo, like May Mobility, is interested in technologies that facilitate seamless journeys between modes and providers. We will use the data and feedback from our existing customers about this experience to find ways to innovate our current service, outside of the traditional forty-foot bus, to address gaps in transit for the first and last mile.

IndyGo has also updated its software technology for the ease of our customers. As part of our process, the next layer was to replace our prior paratransit software and upgrade to a different vendor. Since the upgrade, our productivity has gone up, along with our on-time performance.

In August 2019, we launched the city's first BRT service, the Red Line. This 13-mile system runs through the heart of downtown Indianapolis from north to south, providing increased frequency, reliability, comfort and convenience. Since its launch, numerous businesses have invested in the Red Line and shown their commitment to the innovative expansion. IndyGo has enjoyed tremendous support nationwide since launching the Red Line two years ago, including strong allies in Washington D.C. But, at the same time, we have endured friction from our own Statehouse. While proceeding with BRT, we've worked to ensure our legislators fully understand and appreciate the value of public transportation to our region—especially to our vulnerable and underserved communities.

Additional BRT systems, the Purple and Blue lines, will launch in the coming years. There are nearly \$2 billion worth of investments already planned along the Blue Line, which isn't planned to go into service for at least five years. Those investments include a \$250 million redevelopment of the old property and a new, improved FedEx facility at the airport.

As we start the second half of 2021, now is the time for public transit agencies around the country to maximize opportunities to improve the mobility experience for all our customers.

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