

CLIENT

SEPTA:
Southeastern Pennsylvania
Transit Authority

DATES

2021-2023

COLLABORATORS

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REFERENCE

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BUDGET

~\$150,000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEPTA's new approach to Regional Rail envisions a lifestyle network that is more equitable, inclusive, and seamless. Reimagining Regional Rail set out to create a vision of what that looks like and how to realize that vision. CtD worked with the technical team to develop the three-phase engagement strategy and design impact-driven engagement tools that deepened the understanding of barriers to using the system, as well as opportunities available through service improvements. A hallmark of the project was the 'engagement snack cart' that our team custom designed and built to enable planners to meet communities on and off rail lines and ensure results representative of SEPTA's ridership. CtD's work ultimately allowed SEPTA to better understand riders' needs for the future of a reimagined Regional Rail.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

SEPTA Forward, SEPTA's strategic plan, envisions Regional Rail as part of a lifestyle network of frequent, all-day, and all-week services that connects people to a range of destinations across the region. Reimagining Regional Rail set out to create a vision of what that looks like and sought to identify the infrastructure, equipment, operations, and policies needed to achieve this vision. Through the project, SEPTA asked what the Regional Rail network could be and how to make this service more useful to more people. Although 125,000 people rode Regional Rail daily prior to the pandemic, the network is designed in a way where many residents have been historically left behind. For example, service patterns typically benefit riders commuting 9-5 into Center City from suburban areas, many stations are not ADA accessible, and the system is confusing to new or infrequent riders.

The 18-month project set the goals to increase and improve opportunities, prioritize an intuitive rider experience through a seamless, welcoming system, and create a reliable, predictable Regional Rail System that people can trust. As engagement task lead for Phases 1 and 2, CtD created the public participation plans for those phases and executed the key tactics.

Working closely with an engineering and planning team, CtD designed an outreach and engagement plan to reach people where they are, both on and off the rail. The three-phase approach developed directly tied public input to key decision points in the process by layering tactics and tools to reach a wider range of the region's population that both prioritized equity and historically underrepresented residents in planning processes.

In Phase One, the project team sought to better understand why people ride Regional Rail and why they do not ride. The phase - the first public view of the project - launched with a survey that quickly received over 5,000 responses. The data analysis found that these online responses were not reflective of actual ridership and pinpointed the select geographical regions (indicated by clustered ZIP codes) of mainly white, wealthy respondents. Layers of engagement tactics are critical to develop a more complete view of users and potential users. Thus this information allowed the team to develop a data-driven approach to decide the locations for the next tactic: two days of pop-ups, visiting 9 locations on and off the rail.

People
Reached

Over
18,000

People
Engaged

10,000+

However, this was no ordinary pop-up; CtD custom designed and built an ‘engagement snack cart’ that was able to travel on and off the rails, creatively engaging the senses and attracting hundreds of participants. As a result of this strategy, the team was able to capture insights from underrepresented communities that were not reflected in the initial online survey data. The week of the pop-ups, the share of participants who completed the online survey and identified as female increased from 41% to 50% of respondents, much more reflective of actual ridership. The snack cart utilized to carry out surveys has since become a hallmark of the project after rolling down the aisles reaching people where they are: on the train!

For Phase Two, a deeper conversation with communities was needed to discuss the possibilities for service through the lens of three different scenarios. A custom online tool was programmed to match individuals with the scenario that best suited their needs through five simple filter questions, which would then be submitted directly to SEPTA. This removed a large educational barrier from the phase. For those who wished to study the scenarios further, a wealth of information about the available options was additionally provided on the project’s website. The online experience was replicated through an in-person interaction in a high-volume Center City station, supplemented with community-specific workshops that provided more context-specific examples. This is especially vital for areas that would see great benefits from increases in service, particularly focusing on communities of color with dense populations, but currently low ridership.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Engagement Outcomes:

- The project successfully engaged over 10,000 individuals in its initial two phases, reaching thousands of people across the region. It will now proceed to Phase 3 in 2023, which will provide recommendations and a timeline for implementation.
- Insights gained during Phase 1 revealed challenges related to frequency, reliability, system accessibility, and inclusivity for Regional Rail riders. In Phase 2, discussions on ridership scenarios highlighted strong support for transitioning parts of the Regional Rail infrastructure to more frequent Metro-style service, promoting greater usage and accessibility.

Insights and Implications:

- Phase 3 will build upon the valuable insights obtained during the engagement process, addressing identified barriers, improving system accessibility, and creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all Regional Rail riders. The phase will culminate in recommendations and an implementation timeline.
- The forthcoming release of the final plan in 2023 will signify an important milestone, incorporating collaborative community input and presenting a comprehensive vision for the future of Regional Rail. The plan aims to enhance frequency, reliability, and user-friendliness, aligning with the region’s transportation needs and aspirations.

