

## Transportation/Transit Enhancements

### ***Narrative***

Lee County Transit Edison Mall Station  
Fort Myers CRA/LeeTran

For over 20 years, LeeTran, the County transit system, had an unwritten agreement with the Edison Mall, owned by the Simon Property Group and located in the Cleveland Avenue Redevelopment Area, to use one of the mall entrances as a bus transfer point. The transfer facility consisted of two small, standard bus shelters, but most patrons waited for their bus inside the mall entrance. As the number of transit riders using this north/south–east/west transfer point grew to over 250,000 per year, the security and cleanliness of the transfer point became an issue of concern for the mall owner: up to eight buses at a time would stack up at the mall entrance, forcing bus riders to walk in between idling buses and discouraging mall shoppers from using this entrance. Finally, in 2006, LeeTran was told to relocate the transfer point off the mall property. Thus began a nearly six-year odyssey to maintain a viable transfer point at this critical location—the intersection of busiest north/south and east/west corridors in Lee County.

### **Innovation**

- This project was a collaborative effort between Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), LeeTran, Lee County, Fort Myers Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), and Simon Property Group.
- Following the mall's notice to relocate off their property, the CRA worked closely with LeeTran to identify alternative locations adjacent to the mall that met the transfer facility's needs. Making the task even more challenging was the fact that the facility, located at the crossroads of LeeTran's major north-south and east-west routes, had specific size and access requirements. Since no suitable sites were identified, the CRA had to secure a letter from the Mayor in 2007 to the Simon Property Group, encouraging the mall to reconsider its notice to vacate.
- In an effort to engage the mall owner in a meaningful discussion, the CRA pledged \$65,000 for LeeTran to hire an architect to help locate a site within the mall's parking lots and to prepare renderings of a state-of-the-art bus transfer facility that would complement the mall's planned \$13 million façade renovation.
- Funding in the form of a \$625,000 FDOT grant, \$625,000 Lee County CIP appropriation, and \$500,000 CRA lease guaranty, was secured to insure that the project could become reality.
- After several more years of negotiations involving a change of mall managers and the election of a new Mayor, a 10-year lease on a remote section of the mall parking lot containing 128 parking spaces was finally secured. This necessitated a parking variance for the reduction in the number of spaces required by the City and a 10-year lease guaranty by the CRA, as the FDOT grant required a minimum 20-year lease.

### **Impact on the Community**

- Identifying a new location and a state-of-the-art design allowed the county's busiest transfer station to remain on mall property. The Edison Mall Station is the busiest in the county; it services eight routes and sees more than 100 bus trips per day with about 250,000 passengers traveling through the station over the course of a year. Since the Edison Mall is located at the north-south/east-west crossroads for the county, keeping the station on the mall property was critical to meeting the county's public transit needs of maintaining the bus schedules and getting the public transit users to their jobs and medical appointments on time.
- On January 3, 2012, the newly-constructed transfer station—that included 8 bus bays, restrooms, Wi-Fi, route maps, security personnel, an information center, and plentiful seating—opened for

service. Seating was increased from less than a dozen seats at the old location to 64 in the new one, with room for up to 130 people when standing.

- The covered platform in the new facility provides not only provides protection from the hot Florida sun and summer showers for those waiting, but also allows for the people transferring directly from one bus to another to make the transition without weathering the elements.
- This new station better serves the patrons who travel through the stop on a daily basis, as well as providing convenient public transportation for many of the mall's employees and shoppers.

## **Funding**

- Total project costs were just over \$1.25 million:
  - \$625,000 grant from FDOT,
  - \$625,000 from Lee County Capital Improvement Program,
  - \$65,000 CRA design grant,
  - \$7,500 for parking study from the CRA.
- Fort Myers CRA is also funding a \$500,000 back-up guaranty for the FDOT grant (should the mall not agree to extend the 10-year lease for another 10-year term) through a \$50,000 payment per year, for 10 years, into a sinking fund. If the County's lease with the mall is renewed, the CRA regains full use of these funds.

## **Problem Solving**

- In 2006, the Edison Mall, owned by Simon Property Group, informed the CRA and LeeTran that the "bus stop" located behind JC Penny's needed to be relocated. What originally started as a bus stop years before had turned into the county's busiest transfer "station", with buses stacked six to eight deep. Mall management had determined that 60% of their maintenance and security expenses were spent on the bus transfer point and its riders. The people waiting on their buses not only created maintenance and security headaches, but would intimidate mall patrons.
- The make-shift transfer station also created a safety concern as mall patrons and bus passengers had to weave through the three or four double-parked buses.
- Mall management also felt the buses were causing excessive wear and tear to the asphalt on the mall's perimeter roads caused by the buses wheels as they turned into the parking lot to drop off passengers next to the building.
- In 2007, with the help of the Fort Myers CRA, LeeTran and Simon Property Group were able to come to a verbal agreement on terms that included a new location on the perimeter of the mall property.
  - The mall agreed to allow LeeTran to move several shelters to a "temporary station" adjacent to where the new, eight-bay station would be constructed. This "temporary" solution was challenging to the people riding the bus since there were no restrooms, security or substantial protection from the sun or inclement weather while they were awaiting the arrival of their bus.
- During the 2007 negotiations, the mall expressed concern about the impact on its tenants of losing 120 parking spaces to relocate the bus transfer station. Management requested that the CRA conduct a parking study to determine whether any parking spaces adjacent to the proposed location could be realigned to improve traffic flow, pick up additional parking spaces, and provide a pedestrian walkway from the transfer facility to the mall for mall employees and customers.
  - The deal was again put in jeopardy when the mall felt the solutions from the parking study were too costly. The City's solution was to issue a credit to the mall for the 120 spaces, subject to the lease for the transfer station being fully executed. The credit took effect at the

commencement of construction and will remain in place until such time as Lee County removes the transfer station from the mall's property.

- In 2011, still awaiting an executed ground lease, Lee Tran was put in danger of having the state's \$1 million matching grant\* expire without using the funds. Blaming the delay on the fact that they had to obtain approval for the loss of parking spaces from several of their anchor tenants, Simon Property Group did not produce an executed lease until the spring of 2011. With the construction of the station estimated at nine months, LeeTran was left with an extremely tight schedule since they were not able to request bids for construction until after the lease was executed and all work had to be completed by December 31, 2011.
  - The executed agreement finally came after the Mayor and City Manager of Fort Myers met with Simon Property Group and LeeTran in an effort to move the project along. If the project had fallen apart, not only would LeeTran have lost the \$1 million FDOT grant\*, but the \$72,500 the CRA had invested in the project would have been lost as well.

*\* While the FDOT awarded a \$1 million matching grant to LeeTran for the project, since construction costs came in lower than anticipated, grant funds actually paid to LeeTran for the Edison Mall Transfer Station were in fact \$625,000.*

### **Applicability to Other Communities**

- The success of the collaborative public/private partnership between Lee County, City of Fort Myers, CRA, LeeTran, FDOT and Simon Property Group (one of the largest mall and shopping center developers in the country) should encourage other communities to seek out similar collaborations when a project calls for them.
- Creative funding from FDOT, Lee County and the CRA was utilized, including in-kind architectural services provided by the County in order to help keep the out-of-pocket costs as low as possible.
- Understanding that an important component of successful retail involves appearance, the CRA and LeeTran designed the façade of the transfer facility to match the renderings of Edison Mall's proposed exterior renovations.
- Perseverance pays off! Don't give up on projects that are critical to fulfilling an important need in the community. With escalating fuel prices and the corresponding downturn in the economy, LeeTran and the City recognized the ever-increasing need for public transit.