

Our conversation today is with Jennie Rowland, transit manager for the Big Woods Transit Program, serving the Nett Lake Chippewa in Northern Minnesota. Jennie was on the national RTAP review board and that's where I got to meet her. She served as a chair of the RTAP review board in her final year. She wanted to share information about her program and the story of her challenges, providing transit service to her tribe and building and maintaining the Big Woods transit system.



Robin Phillips:

When you woke up one morning and you were a transit manager, what did you do?

Jennie Rowland:

A very common story that you hear from a lot of transit people is that we didn't graduate from high school and go to university for transit. We usually have a lot

of life experiences. We come from all walks of life from all different careers, and then we wake up one morning and here we are in transit, and we love it, and we stay.

Robin Phillips:

What happened on your first day?

Jennie Rowland:

On my first day, they just basically hired me because I have a long history of logistics in my background. I spent 10 years as a 911 operator coordinating emergency services. After that, I spent another 10 years as a communications center manager for the Forest Service. When I interviewed for the position, I basically sold it as strong logistics delivery of a product in a timely manner, whether it be aircraft and retardant dropping on a wildland fire or buses and bringing people to where they need to go. And they said, let's do it. I had been striving to be in a position where I could create something. I had worked within established systems, and I was not always comfortable with the way they treated other people. I was always up on my soapbox, basically saying, if I was queen for a day, this is how I would do it. I've created a positive people focused program. When I hire people, they stay. People like myself who feel a strong desire to give back to our communities and have a strong desire to leave a legacy of helping others. You get that in this job.

Robin Phillips:

Not very many people have been to visit Nett Lake. Can you just tell a little bit about

your service area and where you are and your system a little?

Jennie Rowland:

I think our story is very similar to a lot of tribal lands and tribal Indian country. We are at the end of the road, we're way up in Northern Minnesota. I am one hour from the Canadian border. We are unique in the



fact that we have three non-contiguous unconnected land sectors and that make up the Bois Fort Bandage Chippewa reservation. They're each about 60 miles from each other, so it's kind of a logistics issue and providing transit services. What we have is a very large service area that provides public transit service to all the native communities and native villages, but we also provide all the same services to all the non-native communities within that area. When we go from the Nett Lake sector where the government buildings are over to the Vermilion sector, where the Fortune Bay Resort Casino is located, we provide employee commuter routes between the two sectors. We also have about a half a dozen small villages and communities that are non-native non-reservation. In between that, we provide the same public transit services too.

Robin Phillips:

You walked into this situation, and you were now your own mentor. What would you tell a brand-new transit manager?

Jennie Rowland:

I get really wrapped up in wanting to make things happen right away, you must calm down and know that anytime that you're dealing with people and you're dealing with the public, things are not going to move at the rate that you would like to see them move. A lot of it is communication. Perfect example, we have our shopping route leaves the barn here at 9:00 AM six mornings a week, and we're starting our 11th year of service. And I still have people question what time the bus leaves? And I always say it's never left any at any other time, but 9:00 AM. We just keep answering the questions like we've never heard the question before, like it's brand-new information and I call that customer service.

Robin Phillips:

What do you do to keep those drivers happy?

Jennie Rowland:

When I created the program, I really did get to be Queen for a day, and I created it just the way I wanted it. And that is, it's culturally significant, it's culturally appropriate and we've tried to integrate the culture, our own culture into every aspect of the program. When we received a new bus that was spoke to me by our spiritual leader,

the buses provide service and



transportation for the community, not unlike the original boys Fort Ponies and the horse did for our communities a few decades ago. That's the way we treat them. We treat them like they are ponies, and we name them, and we have a welcoming ceremony and dinner when new buses come into the community, and we have the drum, and we gift, and we sing the safe travel song for every bus. We also sage on a regular basis. I'm training a young man now as a bus driver and I emphasize with my drivers the cultural appropriateness of the services that you're doing. This is intrinsic to our culture to be a service to our communities, to help others to care for others. And that's how I want my drivers to approach the job. If you see someone walking along the highway, you stop. You don't go past them; you see what they need. What do they need? Where do they need to go? Is there

something you could do? If there isn't anything you can do right now, you can call the office and maybe we can do something for them. Always showing respect for our community members regardless of what they need or what issues they're going through currently. I rely very heavily on my drivers. I'm their supervisor, but not behind them on the bus. So, I rely very heavily on their feedback on what's happening in the community and what they think is needed and do they believe that there's a certain route that could satisfy that need in the community? I give them an enormous amount of responsibility. If the roads are bad and you've watched the weather report and you think that there's going to be a lot of snow, then you need to leave early. You need to just go in an hour early, call all your passengers, tell them that you're going to be leaving early for them to go warm the bus up and do it. If you've only got one passenger and you don't think they're going to get there on time, then leave 20 minutes late. That's entirely up to them. They manage their routes; they manage their passengers, and they manage the buses. It's their responsibility and it really gives them a sense of ownership and contribution to the community to keep people safe. I have people at the casino waiting for my bus to come in so they can follow that bus back and know that they'll be safe following the bus. When you're dealing with FT money or any grant money, really any government money, there's not a whole lot you can do. That contract that you sign is very limited to what you can do and what you can't do. I can't offer you super competitive wages, but I can

let you pick out some super kickass uniforms. We buy uniforms twice a year. So, they always get something new they're wearing and everybody's super happy with them. When they leave, for example, I had a guy retire for health reasons. They let them keep their hoodies and then they return the rest of the uniforms.