



Unedited Transcript
Mpact Podcast Episode 78

Culture Change in Cleveland

A 1-1 Conversation with Billy Terry, Executive Director of the National Transit Institute at Rutgers University, and India Birdsong Terry, General Manager and Chief Executive Officer of the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority

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Grace Crunican (0s): Welcome to the Mpact Podcast. This is Grace Crunican, Interim CEO of Mpact, formerly known as Rail~Volution. More than a year ago, we launched our new name and tag line, Mpact: Mobility Community Possibility. We are a national organization working at the intersection of transit, related mobility options and community development. The podcast is a chance to hear from a range of voices as we go deeper into how we leverage transit to make communities better for people.

Jeff Wood (42s): Hi there. I'm Jeff Wood, Principal of The Overhead Wire and your host. This month on the Mpact Podcast, we're featuring a one-to-one conversation featuring Billy Terry, Executive Director of the National Transit Institute at Rutgers University, and India Birdsong Terry, General Manager and CEO of the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority. Stay with us.

The Call for Speakers for the 2024 Mpact Transit + Community Conference in Philadelphia is now open, through Friday, March 29th. Get all the info at mpactmobility.org/speakers. Remember, the deadline is Friday, March 29th. Don't miss your chance to be a speaker in Philadelphia.

Billy Terry (1m 27s): Welcome to the Mpact Podcast. I'm Billy Terry, executive director of the National Transit Institute housed at Rutgers University. And I'm excited to be here today as an Mpact Champion. An Mpact Champion is one of those organizations that supports the ongoing work of Mpact to build bigger, stronger communities around transit, all throughout our country. And today I am extremely excited to have with me India Birdsong Terry. How are you doing today, India?

India Birdsong Terry (1m 57s): I'm doing well. How are you, Billy?

Billy Terry (1m 59s): I'm doing excellent. I'm doing excellent. Now, India and I, we share a last name, but we're not related. I would be honored to call her family. And actually, we are family, we are transit family. I've had an opportunity to know India for quite some time. Our paths

have crossed. So, India, tell us a little bit about India the leader. Tell us just a little bit about yourself, but with a, with a little spiciness of India, the leader,

India Birdsong Terry (2m 31s): So Billy that you always lead in with the, the most interesting questions, right? I'm thinking what is, what is my brother from another mother going to ask today? So first I want to say thank you for, for being here and, and sharing the, the podcast with you. This is really nice to be able to just kind of talk as colleagues, but as friends about the industry and about some of the things that we're facing, I think as a, as a nation when it comes to obility. So India is a leader. It it, I can say I, I don't know that my leadership ability, I think really depends on the success of the team.

And so it's a little weird to say, but I don't think of it that way. I just feel as one of the team and just the loudest person on the team. And it's funny, I'll tell it you a quick story if I can and then get to the answer. We just had our leadership retreat about 30 days ago, and this was, if you think of the, the top 50 decision makers at G-C-R-T-A, right? We have a little over 2000 people here. And so a lot of those folks that are in those either c-suite or director level positions or decision-making pivotal roles tend to be in the, the offices a lot or tend to be the lead person out at the districts or the garages, you know, district is, is what we call them.

So they're the folks that probably are in a suit, probably aren't getting their hands quite as dirty, you know, physically, but have a lot of the brain power and the connections that move us through the community. And so a lot of these folks are making decisions on their own or at the tail end of a crisis, right? So it was interesting that I wanted to get us out of our, our comfort zone. So true, true form. We, we do the educational thing in the first day of the retreat, which is nice because I have, I come from a very long line of educators.

So in my family you usually own a business or you're an educator. And so those are the predominant kind of vocations in my family, or you get into politics in, in some weird way, whether it's you're the, the leader of your block club or, you know, manage some kind of business or something. So we're, we're not really shy. A little loud, as you probably know, is a Terry. So that's, that's what we got into. So we had the educational part actually at the community college, Tri-C co corporate community college here in Cleveland. And then we had the second day where we were supposed to take, and we did, we took our theoretical ideas and put them in practice to be able to really show the leadership that we had really like leaned into for the first eight hours the first day.

And then we went down to The Foundry and For, those of you who may not be aware, the foundry is a rowing facility, a a crew facility that's in the flats in downtown Cleveland. And it's an amazing facility, but a lot of people just forget it's there. And so, you know, we did run it through legal and I got everybody to sign off on the waiver and they kind of panicked a little bit because I told 'em, I said, leave your suits at home, you know, wear your sweats and your hoodies and everything. I think I had on an Urban League sweat shirt, you know, I said on the board there and just, you know, lean into who you are.

We, we got on ergs, and the road machines and, and we got in the tank and wow. Yeah, it was really cool. We had a lot of folks who, I mean, some folks were red face and huffing and puffing,

Billy Terry (5m 40s): They had to tap out.

India Birdsong Terry (5m 41s): Yeah, nobody tapped out. But I was a little nervous. But it was nice because we actually had to physically row together in order to not clash oars and, you know, in order to actually move the boat, so to speak. And I think it really kind of humbled a lot of folks where they learned that you have to follow the leader in front of you. It doesn't matter if you are their boss, right? And that happens sometimes. You might have an administrative assistant rowing in front of you and their directors behind them, and if they don't follow them, the boat is going to sink.

And so it was really fun doing that. And of course we had a, a competitive spirit where we had a sudden death challenge is what they called it. And we had to de rig and rig the boat where we actually had to put the oars together and, and that again, you could not roll unless you actually help your teammate, right? So we had people diving on the floor and, you know, doing all kinds of things. And so it was really cool. So to your, to hopefully answer your question, I think my leadership is characterized by some surprises and also hopefully a good balance of, of forward movement, right, like you're rowing the boat, but also being able to kind of have a little bit of a, a humility to it and that you have to put yourself in someone else's shoes to really appreciate the product that we're providing, which is mobility services, right? And if you don't do that completely and immerse yourself into listening to someone else's opinion, you'll never really be a good leader. So I hope that answers the question.

Billy Terry (7m 10s): Absolutely. What, what a, what a powerful example of, of leadership, but in the reality that at times and in circumstances, everyone has to serve as a leader, right? What a, what a what a powerful example of, of, of leadership, servant leadership. So India, now you've been at G-C-R-T-A since 2019,

India Birdsong Terry (7m 33s): Right.

Billy Terry (7m 33s): Coming from Wego Nashville, our good friend Steve Bland and others, and then in the Chi hometown Chicago got, I can feel that wind whipping up there now. So I, I don't want to be like super cheesy or generic with this question, but, but so I want to ask it like this, is there an element of India that drew her to transportation? Is there something about who you are, what you represent, what you believe in that drew you to working in the industry of public transportation?

India Birdsong Terry (8m 15s): So that's actually an easier question than, than I anticipated. Only because my educational background is actually in language arts, it's in English and Spanish, right? Which a lot of it doesn't have on, on its surface a lot to do with transportation, but it totally helps when it comes into branding, right? So we go, as you mentioned, used to not be, we go, it went through a rebranding when I was there. And that's, you know, going into actually

your public face with the, with the outside world, so to speak, outside of your agency and kind of getting that public trust.

So that help there, public transit is always asking for money, right? We cannot function without the, the, the federal grants and without the local matches and the state help and all of that. So we have to be able to explain ourselves in a way where it is understandable, it's clear, concise and transparent, right? Because the, the worst thing you want to do in transit is lie to someone because you're going to be found out by 5:00 PM right? Your, your rush hour is where you get either you get made or broken.

So going from being an English and Spanish major in college and thinking about law and not doing it and moving into urban planning is where I think the Transit comes into play. So, so I'm an urban planner by trade and community development, community developer type interaction is, is where I really kind of got into the work of transit. And so transitioning from community development and urban planning into transportation was a little easier than I would have anticipated, but it still was unexpected because I never really would have been able to tell you that transportation was an immediate indicator of urban life and even a rural life as well, right?

The accessibility portion, I think you realize that later, but my interest in transit came from working on a community development project in Chicago for the CTA, right? And so I actually started as a facilitator on a, on a bus system redesign. so I was using the community development skill that I had in order to translate what we were doing with and to the community and get their feedback. And then it just went from there and become a service planner and, and you know, on and on until I am now.

So, I think that the curiosity to want to know, "Who makes the decision to put our assets in our community? Where? And does it reflect the needs of the community?" was my immediate introduction to urban planning. And then it was a natural sort of progression in the transit as I learned how to help people find their voice to express what they need. And transit just happened to be where I landed.

Billy Terry (11m 3s): Oh wow. One, one quick question. Was that work that you did? Were you an employee of CTA at that point or some other entity?

India Birdsong Terry (11m 18s): When I started the facilitator work, yes. On the, yes. So yes, so I was a full-time employee. They called it. They had some odd name that was like a hybrid, which basically said, I think it was full-time temporary is what it was. so I was being paid out of a grant that was associated with the actual, but I was considered a full-time employee, but I was not a permanent employee until I actually had to apply for a job that was not attached to a project. And that I think my first, you know, real, so to speak, full fledged position was maybe a year or two later after the redesign was over.

And then I became part of the service planning department as a, I think it was a planner one.

Billy Terry (12m 1s): Right, right. Wow. And look at you now. Look at you now. And so one more question, getting back to when you spoke about your language background and, and how useful that is in your role now as the president and CEO of G-C-R-T-A-I, I would imagine that those skills are useful because you are communicating with a, with a diversity of individuals in the community, right?

From community college presidents to local elected officials to people in community suburban communities. So can you, can you talk a little bit about not just so much when in Rome concept, but the, the capacity and the, and the foresight that has to go into speaking to those different elements of your, not just your community, but in India the region, right? Speaking to those different elements who all need different things from Mobility.

India Birdsong Terry (13m 2s): So Billy, I think that's a really interesting question. I was just writing down little notes while I was listening to the question, right? so I don't forget anything. And first I'll say it starts with, with decent grammar, if I could just lay it out, right?

Billy Terry (13m 15s): Exactly.

India Birdsong Terry (13m 18s): And you know, it sounds silly, but I think it goes a long way, first because something written well and with intention connotes the idea that you care, right? And it, it, you know, gives the, the idea that you've taken your time, you're writing it for the person who's reading it, you know, you're not just writing it at some upper echelon level that doesn't translate to the typical person who's just riding a bus and may not have knowledge or education of all the intricacies of some funding package, right?

You're trying to let them know that you're here to take them from A to B, and then I think it's gotta be able to be translatable. So it's funny because we've had, I literally was just in here this office 30 minutes ago before I logged on and talked to you talking to our, our internal comms manager and she's a lady named Kristie Cox doing great job for us, came from a different system, a smaller system in Ohio a couple years ago and really has started to kind of shaped the way that we are creating our internal communications package.

And a lot of that is trying to understand the difference between the voice that you're trying to have in one document versus another. So the way that you talk to your legislators, as you were saying, might have to have something in that document that speaks to them so that they can feel confident to be an ambassador for you. But if I'm only speaking to them in the voice that is advantageous for me, then they're going to tear it up and go on to the next document, right? I never get that resolution passed or, or the funding support or whatever I'm asking for.

But if I make them feel like they're prepared to answer a decent amount of questions within reason, right? Then they feel like they're armed with more information, understanding that they have to be a supporter to begin with. I'm not here, I'm not a sales person. I'm not here to, you know, to sell you on transit. You either believe it or you don't. And then we have to prove

to you that we're worth your time. So if we have you in that, that yes bucket, right? And and that's something we started to, to talk about internally is, is what's a net promoter score?

You've heard that term perhaps on the private industry, right? And that's basically how likely is someone else to sell you on something that I do? They're the word of mouth push, right? That's the greatest ambassador we can have, you know, respect to all of the legislators that are out there and the support mechanisms and you know, the APTAs and the coms and all of this. They are fantastic, fabulous. We couldn't do it without them. But my main, my main target is that person who's making the decision to take the bus or the train or to hop in their car.

And if I can get that person who has a choice, the dependent rider is absolutely important too, right? But if I can get that person who has a choice to hop in a car or an Uber or whoever, a rare a rideshare or hop on one of our, our vehicles for public transit and they choose us, then I'd won. Because that person is likely going to tell someone that they had a good experience just the same way as they'll tell somebody that they was horrible. Don't take it. I never want to again. Right?

I want to be able to have them be our mouthpiece. And the more, if you look at the math on that, and you take a a, an alderman or a council person and they've got 10,000 people in their district and 5,000 of them are RTA supporters, that goes a long way

Billy Terry (16m 54s): Reverberates farther,

India Birdsong Terry (16m 55s): Right? So then when, when that legislator is talking in front of that person or that 5,000 constituency that had a good, you know, experience with r ta, it makes it easier. They don't have to sell, they just are reverberating the things they already know. They're regurgitating it and it's almost like going to church and everybody's Amen. Absolutely. All

Billy Terry (17m 17s): Right.

India Birdsong Terry (17m 17s): And so then when we need to, you know, ask for \$400 million to replace some rail cars, it a little bit easier to be able to get it at the ballot. So that, that's the kind of strategic planning that I'm hoping to impart here in Cleveland.

Billy Terry (17m 30s): Absolutely. And you have a wonderful team. I know several people on your team who are part of those efforts. So it, it only took me 10 minutes or so to ask you to talk about G-C-R-T-A. I am sorry. So, but so can you, can you paint a picture for us, India, you know, For, those who are not familiar with the system there in in Cleveland, can you give us a sense of G-C-R-T-A, who you serve, how expansive you are, the various communities that you serve, and maybe one or two key initiatives that you're engaged in right now?

India Birdsong Terry (18m 4s): Sure. Well, we've got quite a robust system here. As I mentioned, we've got about 2100 employees and that's inclusive of two local unions. We have a fraternal

order of police, FOP, we do have a transit police force as well that is comprised of about 100 officers. And then when you get administrative and canine and all of that, all told, you're probably looking about 150 employees that support our, our security initiative. So they've got their union and then you've got the A TU, the Amalgamated Transit Union, and they handle the bulk of our kind of lay folks, right?

The ones that are operating the, the vehicles and maintaining them and, and, and being public ambassadors for the program. We have traditional bus, big bus, as we call it here, right? Your 40 and your 60 footers. Then you've got your downtown trolleys, which has kind of shrunk a little bit after the pandemic just because of people's work from home. Patterns are a little different. But we've got those services for the park and Rise, and then we have light Rail and heavy rail. We are very proud of the fact that we are the only public transit Rail operator in the, in the state.

And so that's a big deal for us, you know? I understand you're from the East coast Billy, so, you know,

Billy Terry (19m 20s): Well, I'm, I'm right around the way. I'm Pittsburgh. We right down the street that,

India Birdsong Terry (19m 23s): That that's true. That's true. So, you know, we really are excited about that, but it also comes with a lot of stated good repair, right? So that's what we're in the throes of that right now. I mentioned the \$400 million, you know, price tag thereabouts for replacing the Rail Rail car replacement program. We're in the middle of that now and we're almost there. So we're super excited to bring those cars on in a couple years. And then we also have direct access to our airport, so Yeah, yeah, yeah. We were

Billy Terry (19m 51s): Game changer. That's a game changer. Yeah, it is. It is.

India Birdsong Terry (19m 53s): Only if it's utilized, you know, the runway. That's the thing we can't take for granted that we're just there, right. Because you could easily just bypass it. So we have a new airport director that we're really excited about working with as well to just kind of rethink how things work in the city and how we're bringing people into Cleveland. So that's, that's going to take a life of its own in a bit. And then we, we also maintain our fleet in-house, right? We also have paratransit as well. We have paratransit services, which is a, a really source of pride I think for our community and, and for our board as well.

Our, our board chair, Reverend Charles Lucas is in a wheelchair and a user of paratransit every day. So what better, you know, real, real time experience, right? Can, can you get than that? We, we handle that. We've got a fleet of about 80 to a hundred vehicles that operate, you know, out of the paratransit district with about a hundred plus operators and a couple of different three actually third party providers. And we operate the bulk of that. So we handle all of greater Cleveland.

So Cuyahoga County is our service area, within reason. And we've got the accountability to the Mayor of Cleveland. We've got a new millennial mayor who's been in for about two years, Justin Bibb. He actually was a former board member of RTA that brought me here to Cleveland. So really excited about that kind of relationship to be able to move the needle forward. And then we've got a new county executive with Chris Ronayne, who was a planner. He was this a city planner by trade. So I'm writing my, I'm a, I'm a, you know, we have great mayors and managers through that association.

Lisa Barno heads that up and just being able to think about how to work with constituencies that may not know RTA. So we have three sitting mayors on our board at any given time. And, and that's always a interesting dance to be able to think about how to loop the suburbs in. So we have a lot of things going on, A lot of things

Billy Terry (21m 48s): Also that's an understatement, understatement of the decade. So India, can I link back a little bit to your community development days and, and, and ask you to tease out a little bit how the, the work of RTA is adding to the Regional economic development. Clearly you talked about the direct line to the airport, but can you talk a little bit about RTA a's contribution to, and i, I dare say Renaissance, but to the, the, its economic development contribution to what's going on at the city, the, the residential and commercial development along the Healthline.

Just, just a number of different ways that RTAs efforts are contributing to the economic vitality of the city or the region for that matter.

India Birdsong Terry (22m 32s): Absolutely. So we've got a lot of different avenues that I think we are really starting to kind of get comfortable in. Again, and I say, I always say kind of like a rebirth, right? So the Renaissance term will definitely take that. Just being able to kind of like turn the lights back on, you know what I mean? Especially after Covid being able to, to see people in person and, and not being able to do that over the last few years, I'd actually say has, has not been a hindrance for us. You know, it's been a challenge for sure. But I got here about six months before the pandemic started and I was, you know, fresh off the airplane right?

Coming in from Tennessee. And so I think the question was, okay, are you going to be able to, you know, get to know Cleveland? You're not from here. Now I do a little secret is half my family's from Ohio and this Chicago, right? so I, I, Ohio's not new, but it's always new if you haven't lived there. So you never can take that for granted. But I, I had to figure out how to make it my city and to learn it in the midst of the pandemic in the virtual age. So our team got together and we really started to think about what do we need to clean up?

What areas do we really need to be able to shore up so that when we do emerge from this, we emerge stronger than we were when we got into it. And I said, this is the grind time. Cleveland's a little bit of a gritty city, you know, respectfully, it's a blue collar city. You know, that's kind of what I'm from. And you, you, you get that with Pittsburgh, same kind of thing. And you know, we grind hard, but I think we, we grind in silence. And I think that's a benefit,

right? Because you can get the work done and you can get the shine later. Don't, don't worry about don't chase the award. So that's the culture change that we've gotten into over the last few years.

And to get to your question, going back to the community development, I love to be able see a plan come together, but it has to be done over time, but it has to be done in a hurry, right? So it's there. And I think we decided that transit oriented development should be on the top five of our priorities, right? So how can we look at the issues of greater Cleveland and work to start to solve it? And economic disparity is at the top of the list for Cleveland Ohio, especially in the urban core.

So it's a very wealthy city in terms of history and contribution to the country and all of that. But you have a different identity going on and you also have a different strata of economics between your urban core and your suburban areas. And so you could meet somebody that says they're from Cleveland, but they may be from the suburbs and, and vice versa, right? So we started to think about housing, workforce development and job creation, Mobility to those jobs and how we can impact that. And also diversity.

And those were the areas of interest. We had a few others of course with the built environment that are equally important to make people and safety, safety was another one. So when you look at those kind of priorities, it was a great time because we actually were right in the middle of putting the final touches on a, a long-term, 10 year strategic plan when I, when I came in the door and it takes us out to 2030. Yeah. And it was about halfway done when I walked in. And we had done some pillar studies and some great ground, you know, research. But we still had to kind of agree that these are things that were important and there was a lot in that plan.

And being a planner, you know, I can identify a plan that's, that's pretty aggressive and you need to have some steps in between the get to 2030, right? And so we actually signed that off, put the bows on it, and then we went ahead and implemented a short term plan, a short term strategic plan in addition to the long term. so I effectively had the staff go through it again. And then, you know, and then we prioritize the things that we could do in three to five years instead of looking at a 10 range. Right? But it's all based in the, in the one we had, right?

Billy Terry (26m 16s): It's couch senate. Yeah, yeah,

India Birdsong Terry (26m 18s): Yeah. And that's where the TOD comes from. That's where the micro-transit comes from. That's where the workforce and the diversity comes from. And I'll be real quick or quick as I can. Micro Transit for example, is something that we're getting our feet wet, you know, and, and some of our counterparts, Columbus has a great program, a couple of other close cities have good programs that's relatively newer for Cleveland because that was a, a question that I got right away from some of the council folks that said, Hey, we've got job opportunities out further, right?

But the system doesn't take you out that far. There's a gap the first last mile. How do we get to that? So we, we have a couple pilot programs out for that. So another area that we had in addition to micro transit was community development by way of TOD. And so we found that after taking an inventory of the property that we own the actual land, we had a lot of land in odd places, right? So normally you would work with a developer and they'd ask for a parking lot and maybe, or it would or would not be adjacent to one of our, our stations.

And so we started taking the premise that if we're going to engage in acquisition or selling of land, it had to be advantageous for the community as well. It had to be able to have some kind of public transit connection. So we've had a lot of development conversations and MOUs in place to be able to work with developers for mixed use income housing, for example. And so that way we have a direct correlation between being able to get to work, being able to support the elderly, low income, black and brown folks, you know, you name it, to be able to live in these high rises, for example, that may be right next to a bus stop or rail station.

So that's part of that sort of forced collaborative process that we now say, Hey, we actually have a little bit more power than we thought. Let's go ahead and take advantage of it. And then don't get blinded by the dollar sign that comes along with selling off a weird piece of property for a parking lot, you know? Yeah.

Billy Terry (28m 12s): And a, a respectful addendum. Get to work, get to worship, get to medical appointments, get to school, get to recreation, right? All the other things that, that RTA Mobility provides. I'm going to dig in just a little deeper and ask if you can expand. You talked about the strategic plan A, was there any level of community input for the, in, in the strategic planning process? And then also could you maybe elaborate on those opportunities for the ongoing community input?

I don't know if you have a variety advisory council or whatever because, so really what I'm trying to get at India is those elements in those opportunities for community input, as you talked about your number one lobbyist, right? Is an individual who takes your system with any regularity. So elements for community input, I guess is the question.

India Birdsong Terry (29m 3s): Absolutely. So if I go back and I rewind a little bit to the, the system redesign we did a couple years ago, which was next gen is the name of that, that one we actually delayed, we consciously delayed it about six to eight months because we wanted to figure out how to get the most robust community input in the middle of a new pandemic. 'cause it was on track to just come out, right? So all of a sudden you want to have, you know, community input at a library and so and so and nobody shows up because they all get sick, right?

So we had to be able to kind of slow down a little bit and come up with different mechanisms, whether it was surveys electronically or having a, you know, know digital workshops and that kind of thing to be able to, and, and spacing, you know, if they wanted to show up in person to keep everybody health healthy and safe. So we did that. I will say we also,

even after that next gen redesign came out, it still doesn't make everybody happy. You can do the majority, right? So the, the argument, the, the big fight, right? The boxing match was between more frequent or more coverage, you know, it is, it's like the, the sugar, like let's taste more fun.

And so, you know, we kind of found that everybody wanted everything. So we took a traditional kind of, of way of looking at it to make sure that we didn't have replication of three and four lines going down the same road and you could, you know, have a decent walking distance and all of that. And then we took the next couple of years actually to also clean up our internal processes for community outreach, as you mentioned. So it's funny you should say that. We literally just had the swearing in at the, around the holiday time last year in 2023 of our community advisory committee.

And that was one that we had for a while, but it kind of dried up during the pandemic and then it was a great opportunity to say, Hey, let's just revamp this whole thing, right? And so if you served on it before, thank you for your time, you're awesome. You're an emeritus. So we still want to, right, we gotta people, yeah. So we have them as advisors that serve on that, right? A handful of them that still want to be involved and you know, are are are willing and able and then we, we put out it like a, we put out like an application process, like you would be going for a job, right?

'cause it's a job. Yeah. And an extension of our, our 10 member, our board, so they're the CAC is the moniker for that. And they are actually going to have their first meeting coming up in the end of quarter one. So we have a great array of capacities and experiences and a great diversity on that, on that team and that committee. So we're super excited to get them started and they're going to really have that voice of the customer and be involved in everything. So alongside that, we actually just had our first civilian oversight committee meeting last week actually.

And that's our transit police oversight. If you think about it that way, and I'll put the disclaimer out there, we're doing this in a place of positivity, right? We're doing this in a place of positivity. So we're not doing this on the heels of some issue that came up, which is a, a really, you know, blessed way to come at it because you can kind of level set and it, you know, educate people on how to be a good reviewer of incidents that come up. You know, we don't use chokehold and that kind of thing. So all of this came out after post George Floyd, this was part of our reaction to say, hey wait, we've gotta make sure that we are, as our deputy for operations called the 21st century policing, we want to make sure that we're ahead of the curve on these things because we are riding high with a pretty good relationship with our community.

We want to make sure to maintain it. And then at that same time, if you, if you go back about a year and a half, two years, we had our police chief who was retiring after more than 20 years in the seat. And so that was a great opportunity. Yeah, great, great guy. But we were going for a little bit of a different flare, right? And that was a good opportunity. Timing was, was great to be able to go out there and say, Hey, let's, let's look at new leadership too and what does that

look like now that we were, you know, coming off of that. So, and that comes with a lot of changes, right? Because my predecessor was here almost 20 years.

So you, you get the retirements coming and it just marries up for a good opportunity for me to get in some new faces as well and play pay homage to the ones that that came here before us. So we have our first African American female LGBTQ plus police chief. Wow. And yeah, we found her right in our backyard and we had a national search show. You gotta, you gotta work for

Billy Terry (33m 26s): There. She was already there, huh? She was,

India Birdsong Terry (33m 29s): She was there, you know, and she was, she had worked with the city of Cleveland for a long time and this is her first stint as chief, you know, she'd been commander, she'd been lieutenant sergeant, you know, I said that in the wrong order. But she definitely has paid her dues and, and has worked every beat you can think of and, and is a, an educator as well in security tactics and has a great eye on diversity. So we've actually been able to shore up our gaps in getting enough officers because that's a big issue to workforce. So we were down about a fourth of our, our, our manpower in the, the police area.

And we are at a hundred percent at this point. So we've got a waiting list for officers. Wow.

Billy Terry (34m 9s): Wow. Okay.

India Birdsong Terry (34m 10s): Yeah. We changed our whole hiring strategy. That's a whole different conversation Billy, that I hope we'll get into. But that's another area of of change that we, we've definitely kind of jumped into feet first,

Billy Terry (34m 21s): You talked a lot about the assets of RTA to serve the community via, I'm, let, let me, let me just throw a curve ball in here. India, I would submit your greatest asset is your human capital of RTA I dunno, let's just take a moment and, and talk about your philosophy on a enhancing and educating and training your, your workforce and, and let's blend that in and give you an opportunity to talk about you can't, you can't enhance 'em unless you get them in the door first.

So give you an opportunity to talk a little bit about your proactive, purposeful way that you touch recruitment. Or did you, you know, you go about recruitment.

India Birdsong Terry (35m 2s): Sure. Well we, we found a lot of opportunities in the human resources and, and training air division of our company to really revamp some things, right? Because just the way people are being hired is different now than it was in the nineties or the early two thousands or even 10 years ago. So a lot of the demands of the candidate pool are very different. Folks want to work virtually, they want to work hybrid, they want to have access to childcare, they want to have access to mobility options.

I mean there's, there's a lot of things that people are asking for now and expecting that they may not have said out loud 15, 20 years ago. Right? So a lot of that and, and, and we are a shift driven company, right? Like all of our, our our sister agencies. So we haven't gotten to the point where you can drive the bus autonomously yet.

Billy Terry (35m 59s): Not yet.

India Birdsong Terry (35m 60s): Not yet. And so

Billy Terry (36m 2s): Our union brother and sisters, we were Yeah. Had that conversation strategically. Yeah,

India Birdsong Terry (36m 7s): Yeah, yeah. Strategically, right? We, we we're not at the jet there, but we, you know, we'll get there sometime I guess, but right now we have to still bring people in and so that competing with the Amazons that are out there and the, the Uber eats and the so and so and the blah blah blah that you can essentially perhaps make your own schedule or you may not have so many or the same, not so many but so the same rules and regulations, you may or may not have to have a CDL right? To be able to operate a, a vehicle, those kind of things.

And then you get into the maintenance side of it from the digital era. Do you turn a wrench anymore? Do you have grease on you Right. Or are you hitting a button on a computer and making it move? So all that to be said, we realize that we had to be more competitive and the first rule of of transit is that you gotta look at the dash report. You gotta be able to see right? Right. Shout out to Greg Dash. You gotta be able to look and see where you are as far as pay. Yeah. That's the check the box item and it's not an easy check. Right. But you gotta figure that pay.

Yeah. I think we're in the top three, I want to say we're the second best in the Nation for pay to pay for operator in certain certain areas according to of course your market and all of that. Right? Right. So we had to make sure that that was, that was completed. Now in our agency we have union and we have also administrative non-union. So non-BAR. We had not done a compensation study for non bargaining. 'cause you gotta remember gar bargaining of course goes every two, three years. Absolutely. However we contract. So you have a bite at the apple pretty frequently. And I'm talking about the hiring strategy holistically now, right?

So you could have a very happy union, theoretically and a miserable administrative workforce who hasn't had that same consideration because they're not contracted. So that's not fair. Right? You gotta make sure that, that you look at everybody. So we actually went ahead and, and made the decision to embark upon a compensation study for all non bargaining employees. We had not done that in over 25 years. Wow. That let me know that you could have someone who was here for their entire career and, and never had a market analysis completed on a formalized basis.

So we were, had been doing the work, right? So we weren't too far off, but we could move some pieces around, create growth programs for different departments. For example, engineer 1, 2, 3 type of thing. Instead of just having a position and then the director, right? So people had somewhere to go and then you, you kind of eradicate that whole, well what am I worth to you? Right? It says, Hey, this is what you do. Let's look through your job description, let's go through that. It was a little painful. Imagine. Yeah. Yeah. 'cause you're, you're evaluating your work. But then I think it caused us to be able to say, Hey, this is what I do for a living.

I do a lot more than you realize RTA or I don't do as much as you think IRTA. And then we're able to kind of navigate through that. So we did that, had our board involved. It was, it was a good process. Like I said, it was, it was a painful one, but it was a good one. It's a necessary evil. And then quite honestly, mine was separated from that. Right. I'm, I'm a contract employee like all CEOs or most are, but I had to take care of the people first. Right? Absolutely. And then that way it justifies the job. We also wanted to look at childcare. so I mentioned that. This one is a really important piece to me because I, I go through this every day, right.

You know, I have two toddlers I do. And I gotta watch those kids while I'm doing this. And you know, at that time they weren't in school yet. So childcare, I, I got it. You know, I'm like, this is tough. And if you're a shift worker, it's even harder. Yeah. So we actually are going to be launching in March our first, I'm so excited. Our first referral kind of, well it's a program where we will link employees up with resources for childcare. Wow. According to their needs after hours.

Yeah. Oh, after hours. Yeah. Yeah. Wow. So we're working with a, with a company I won't name quite yet 'cause we gotta launch it formally, but we're working through them to be able to kind of say, Hey, you know, I'm a bus operator and I start at 8:00 PM at night. Well you can go on this in this program and be able to kind of put in your needs and output a list of providers that can help you during those hours that are already licensed. So it's a great opportunity just to connect people with things, right?

You make the decision, you're the parent. We don't sign you up, we don't watch your kids for you, but we're giving you the resources you need to be successful here. Yeah. Yeah. So that's one thing. We also had to look at long-term professional development, planning and mentorship. So we have a positive impact program. It's, it's called PIPI hate to say pip 'cause it reminds me of performance improvement program. But it's a, it is a mentor program, positive impact. And it's taken off like wildfire.

And we have looked For those agencies that have done it well and emulated them and tweaked it ourselves. And we've had a tremendous reduction rate in absenteeism and a tremendous increase in keeping people here and retaining and retention for our operators and mechanics. And they just have someone to talk to. And so there's all kind of great stories out there. We just did a podcast with AFTA that should be rolling that out, I think in a week or two really explaining the program. And it's been a beautiful relationship between the union and management to be able to keep people here.

And then one more thing, I have the little brochure. I know you can't see it on the podcast, but it's our refer and earn program and basically it gives you up to \$500 for referring someone who stays for at least a year

Billy Terry (41m 40s): As an operator

India Birdsong Terry (41m 42s): For skilled trades. Okay. So there have certain, yeah. So operators one of them, but they have certain trades that are hard to find so that you get paid incrementally, incrementally as your referral employee stays with us. So we want you to Stay with us. So you re refer somebody who's not your cousin, right?

Billy Terry (42m 4s): Let's

India Birdsong Terry (42m 4s): Say your neighbor or whoever is, and they, they come on board with us and they pass, they, they pass the, the skills test and they get a job offer. You get paid, they pass probation, you get paid, they pass the six month marker or year mark you get paid. So it's a continual kind of investment where now you're becoming a inadvertent ambassador for them to say, Hey man, how you doing? You doing okay? You keeping up with it whether you are interested in their success or not. You want to get paid and you want to Stay with us. So it's a little,

Billy Terry (42m 35s): Little incentive. Yeah. There you

India Birdsong Terry (42m 37s): Go.

Billy Terry (42m 38s): So having said that, and India, I want to get into some, some environmental questions, but, but first, do you think that these targeted changes under your leadership from taking a look at hiring practices to adv advance the mentoring program, advancing people when they're in the door, how do you think that's impacted RTA as an employer of choice in the Cleveland area as compared to 20 years ago? What people thought of the RTA as to as to now of being an employer of choice in the region?

What, what, what are your thoughts?

India Birdsong Terry (43m 14s): Well, I hope that it is causing people to look at us as more than just a bus company or a rail company. That they're looking at us as an economic driver. That we actually connect people with social services. You know, we've got an ambassador program now. We've got social workers that work for us, call 'em crisis intervention specialists. They actually go out along with a transit police officer when needed and just canvas a system. And if somebody needs help and they're unhoused and they need to find a bed and they're riding our system and won't get off, there's a reason for that.

So we have to be sensitive to that. And I'm starting to hear outside of our agency through political leaders, you know, or nonprofits. A matter of fact, I was in a meeting the other day and they're like, Hey, you know, the mission for Cleveland, the City Mission actually referred you guys to us, you know, or referred you all as an option. We hadn't had that experience before. Wow. They're starting to see and say, Hey, RTAs probably got a program for that or let me check. And another thing I think we're starting to see success by way of the people that were getting in the door.

So a lot of the positions we had a really hard time filling before. We're starting to get quality employees that, that want to be part of the change and they want to just be part of the excitement. I'll say a lot of that has to do with our branding. So shout out to Natoya Walker Minor, who is over our, our marketing and external affairs. They're doing a yeoman's job of just making us look good, but telling the truth, you know? And I always tell them, I said, don't apologize, you know, for things and unless you deserve it, and that's okay.

But you gotta make sure that we, so if we make a mistake and we have a delay, we explain to the customers what the problem is and how we're going to fix it. We don't just give them free rise, right? Because that doesn't fix the problem. We don't want it to happen tomorrow. So that creates that trust from the community to say, Hey, they're going to be a little bit more honest with us. And not to say we weren't before, but I think that's the implied action that you have when someone is trusting in you their life line. So if it, you know, if we control whether or not you get hired or fired because you can or can't get to that job appointment on time, there's a nervousness that comes with that.

We have to understand that part. And then one other thing really quickly is the diversity of our teams I think is improving. We have a still a long way to go in certain areas of the business, but we have employee resource groups. We have four right now that are active. We have one for our veterans that's emerging. We have one for women, female employees. That's, that's hit the ground running over the last couple years. We got the LGBT community that is up and running and Latino community that's up and running as well.

So that's really helped, I think, be able to have those hard conversations and make people a little bit more compassionate. Right?

Billy Terry (46m 3s): And, and, and those are people who probably serve in various roles within the agency. A part of you're a veteran, but you may be an operator or you may be a supervisor or you may be Right.

India Birdsong Terry (46m 15s): Right. Yeah, it, it it's everybody. So yeah, absolutely. Yeah. You serve your title out the window when you're in one

Billy Terry (46m 20s): Of the, when you're in a groups. Yeah. So India, let's, let's take a, a few more minutes together, and rightfully so, we are all as a Nation trying to move towards more environmentally friendly mindset, right? And that manifests itself a number of different ways,

right? So for as a transit agency, can you maybe give us a, a, a brief overview about how RTA is a, is a approaching its role in being a good environmental steward, whether it be facilities rolling stock or, or let me, let me pause and say this and some of the challenges you talk about being honest and some of the challenges about being that good environmental steward.

India Birdsong Terry (47m 5s): Yeah. That, that's a major concern that we have here at RTA. I don't think that we have cracked that nut quite yet. It's on our, our plan for this year and next year to really kind of deep dive into it. I will say that my plan is to, part of the plan is to create a sustainability department, and that should be in the works for, for later on this year. So we're actually working on creating job descriptions for that, that area right now, so that we can actually lean into that. Because I think we've done a lot of good things through campaigns, right?

So whether that's being, you know, lead certified on a building, right? Or having solar panels on a bus stop and managing our paper usage and you know, all that. And we have c and g compressed natural gas for the bulk of our vehicles in addition to diesel. We, we've not kind of bust into the electric fleet. And I think a lot of that takes planning and quite honestly, it also takes the manufacturers to be able to work with us to make sure that we have the parts and, you know, deliverables on time. So we're working through that and we're, we're on a couple committees through APTA and, and the like, but I think the sustainability part of it is what's to come for us and to really make that part of the, the fabric of RT a and not a fleeting campaign, right?

So we're doing great work individually on different projects, but I still think we have a ways to go to make sure that we can actually lead the charge on that,

Billy Terry (48m 27s): A very targeted approach to it being multifaceted, like you said, spread throughout the agency. That that's great to hear. That's great to hear. I'm curious, India, you came, so Chicago, Nashville, Cleveland, many distinctions between those regions, but any, any similarities from the different places that you've worked in transit?

India Birdsong Terry (48m 51s): I think they're all blue collar cities within reason, right? I think there, you know, is a certain grit to those cities that they're leaders in their, in their state, you know, either by previous population or, or economic drivers. Cleveland for example, was the top of the heat. And now I think we're trying to get back there as far as population, but the Chicagos and the Nashvilles and, and any other area that I've, that I've worked in always has a certain grit to it. They have a kind of like togetherness that is, it's tough to replicate and I think they're always underdog cities if I can say that.

And so they're the cities that are always trying to either stay on top or compete with the New Yorks and the lass and the so, or the Atlantas and so on and so forth, but they have their own identity. So I, I, I'll say this in closing for that question, Cleveland has its own identity. The Cleveland is not trying to be Columbus or Cincinnati or Dayton or Akron or whoever else. The same way that Nashville's not trying to be Memphis, right? And Chicago's not trying to be

anybody else. I think they're comfortable in the city's identity, but there's always a little work to do to get people from other places to recognize that that diamond, you know, and, and that creates a little bit of a drive that, that I'm attracted to.

So it's, it's probably, it makes a lot of sense why I've chosen those places. Are those,

Billy Terry (50m 12s): Those absolutely all wonderful places, wonderful food, each of them. So in India, people are going to flock to Cleveland for the APTA 2024 Rail conference. Give us, give us a 32nd, what do they have to look forward to, not only when they come to the conference, but a around Cleveland when people come there in June for the APTA Rail conference.

India Birdsong Terry (50m 37s): So I'm going to make a shameless plug to, to ask that you guys play our, our minute video. I think it's a minute and a half or so. I'll send it to you if you need it at the end of this. That would be a great way to kind of show you better than I can tell you. We have a, a, a promo video that, that we've released through afta and it really just embodies the spirit of the city. We're ready to, to kind of reintroduce ourself to, to the industry. We really haven't been out there in the limelight since BRT came online about 15 years ago. so I think we've got a lot of new leadership in the city that is raring to go to make folks understand that Cleveland is really a, a city with a great heart and it's really a beautiful city.

So we're super excited. I have also asked APTA to make sure they come back to us in about another four years when we have our new rail cars. Right. And so we'll have a rags to riches story for you guys.

Billy Terry (51m 28s): Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, I don't think it's a shameless plug by any stretch, but I'm, I'm going to make one too. And just to inform everybody that the Mpact Transit + Community Conference is actually heading to Philadelphia and October this year. You know a little bit about Philadelphia, India, having went to school there. So we absolutely would love to have you come and join us in Philadelphia if you can, and share some of the wonderful work that you're doing. It has been an absolute pleasure and an honor talking with you cousin, and we appreciate you. I am certainly sure.

I will see you very, very soon. Thank you so much for joining the Impact. Podcast. India. Thank

India Birdsong Terry (52m 4s): You. Thank you. It was a pleasure.

Grace Crunican (52m 21s): Thanks for listening. Find out more about our work by visiting our website, mpactmobility.org. Thank you.