



Joe Nathanson: Grad students' project to help Baltimore residents find their way

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Finding one's way around a new city can be a challenging experience without the right information. Even for longtime local residents, traveling to unfamiliar parts of town can be daunting. Think of the barriers faced by newcomers, such as out-of-town students or international visitors, who might be here for months or years.

The challenges of a new city were particularly evident to a group of four graduate students – Kate Ianelli, Priya Pappu, Annie Hill and Emily Mintman – determined to get around Baltimore without a car to the extent that this was possible. Three of the students were new to Baltimore. The fourth was returning to her hometown; while she had access to a car, she joined the others in trying to get around by other means.

They soon found that they needed much better information to accomplish this. And the graduate program that brought them to Baltimore gave them a platform to combine business problem-solving skills with design creativity, leading to real-life solutions. The students decided to apply the unique talents that they were developing in an innovative joint program run by Johns Hopkins University and Maryland Institute College of Art.

The MBA/MA in Design Leadership is the “only program in the United States where students simultaneously work to earn graduate degrees from both a business school at a major research university and a major college of art and design, both of which are recognized globally among the most innovative institutions,” according to the program's website.

I first heard a presentation by the four students at a meeting of Transit Choices, a transportation advocacy group headed by Jimmy Rouse and Executive Director Robin Budish. Intrigued by the project, I was able to meet with three of the students in a follow-up meeting at the JHU Carey School of Business.

Students in the MBA/MA Design Leadership program come with backgrounds that vary widely, including business management, marketing, engineering, finance, art and design, architecture, fine arts, and other fields. Of the students with whom I met, one had a fine arts degree but no business experience. Another, with a degree in architecture, had been designing cybersecurity solutions for a New York bank.

Surely, they could combine these varied skills to getting better bus signs out on the street and more informative signage within the transit vehicles. So the students embarked on this learning adventure, with the encouragement of Design for America, a national network of university-based programs that support design solutions for social good.

BaltimoreLink plans developing

The timing for the student project was ideal. The Maryland Transit Administration is developing its plans for the comprehensive realignment of the Baltimore region's local, express and commuter bus lines. This proposed transformation of the system, known as BaltimoreLink, is scheduled to roll out in stages, with new suburb-to suburb express bus connections to come on-line this summer. The key target date for completing the new bus route system is July 1, 2017.

Think of all the information that must be prepared in anticipation of that date, less than 15 months from now. I discussed this challenge with Michael Helta in MTA's planning and capital programming office. Street signs, individual route maps, available in both paper and digital form, would need updating. System-wide maps, now available in both large foldout paper maps and in poster form at selected bus stop shelters, as well as online, would have to be revised.

This gave the MTA the opportunity to rethink the types of information being made available to the riding public. Why not have bus signs that provide not only route numbers, but also destinations, as in "31 – CCBC Dundalk"? And why not provide extra information at important transportation nodes, now termed "transfer facilities," enabling the rider to make the right connections? These ideas, among many others, along with the appropriate graphic design solutions, are being tested, with the JHU/MICA students serving as informal advisors to the MTA.

MTA is also looking at best practices from other regional transit facilities, including the King County (Seattle) system, TransitLink in Vancouver, and TRIMET in Portland, Oregon. The Houston METRO system, which literally changed its bus routes overnight last August, is particularly instructive for Baltimore's planned makeover.

The JHU/MICA students will be taking a summer break, securing paid internships wherever they might be available. But they expect to be back in Baltimore in the fall as MTA is moving forward with BaltimoreLink implementation. The kind of critical eye and outsider's perspective they bring could be very helpful to a smooth transition when the final route changes come on-line in summer 2017.

Joe Nathanson heads Urban Information Associates Inc., a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He writes a monthly column for The Daily Record and can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net.