

The Development of SunLine Transit: An exemplar of public entrepreneurship networks

The development of the alternative fuel program at SunLine Transit in the Coachella Valley in Southern California illustrates how technological development can emerge out of the interaction around concrete problems and how learning occurs as the organizations involved transform these problems and reshape the basis for interaction.

The SunLine story begins with an aging fleet of diesel buses that had one of the worst service records in the U.S. SunLine's Board authorized management to acquire a new fleet of buses and added, "While you're at it, make them alternative fuel."

This transformed the initial problem from poor service to selecting an alternative fuel technology and involved SunLine with a new set of actors.

After deciding on compressed natural gas, SunLine faced two new problems. They had committed to a technology that they did not know how to maintain and for which no infrastructure existed. These new problems shaped the horizon of organizational activity and pushed SunLine to extend the network of actors to include colleges, original equipment manufacturers, and the local gas company.

In solving the maintenance problem, SunLine acquired the habit of innovation and members of the organization began to treat the conversion to CNG as the first step and ask themselves, "What's next?"

The leadership and staff of SunLine soon articulated a new problem, "How can we become a zero-emissions transit company?"

SunLine selected hydrogen as their initial answer to this question and have begun to organize and operate an experimental program in which they produce hydrogen fuel on-site, using solar energy from photovoltaic arrays, and operate a variety of hydrogen powered vehicles including a fuel cell bus as part of their regular fleet.

