

Summary of 2021 TJPDC Summer Internship

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This summer at the TJPDC has proved to be a fruitful experience that has helped contribute to my professional growth and provided me even more tools for pursuing my professional goals. My interactions with Jessica, the rest of the staff, and stakeholders from the community have reaffirmed my passion for local government and transit, and the partnerships necessary to make regions strong and successful.

While I typically try to stay tuned-in on the issues and leaders in whatever community I am a member of, I was not aware of the planning district commission or the work they did before I came across the intern position. The website and issue portfolio covered by TJPDC instantly drew me in and made me curious about the work done here, and how it compares with organizations and work I am more familiar with in my home state of Kansas. Nowhere back home do we have anything similar to PDCs, much less organizations aimed at reducing fragmentation in government or entities with bike/pedestrian infrastructure or solid waste planning under their purview. While I appreciate the diversity of issues worked on by the TJPDC, I believe there is more room for cross-collaboration and a more holistic approach. I believe more opportunities exist for partnerships between staff on issues like zoning for transit-oriented developments or increased collaboration on grant applications. As a whole, however, I think the TJPDC sets up Charlottesville for success in the many issue areas it covers.

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My perception is that people often overlook bus systems as a whole in cities big and small. In my hometown of Kansas City, everybody regularly rides and talks about the 2-mile-long streetcar, but far fewer ride or talk about the 70+ bus routes covering hundreds of miles of city streets. Even in DC, some of my friends have never been on a city bus but have been on the Metrorail hundreds of times. Discussion so often focuses on the needs of rail that the needs of busses, and thus the needs of cities and people who cannot afford to live right by rail stops in large cities, are not being met.

Although I do not have a car here in Charlottesville, I rarely thought about the public transportation system in the region before this summer. My experience was limited to a few trolley rides to get to downtown, one trip to get up to Men's Warehouse, and one to get to 5th Street Station. As little as I considered CAT in my everyday thoughts, I contributed less brain space, if any at all, to UTS, JAUNT, Charlottesville Schools or Albemarle Schools. I wasn't aware of the existence of a Regional Transit Partnership, and was not aware of any such partnerships in any of the places I have lived before. I have also been impressed by the community involvement in the RTP and the knowledge that people who do not work directly for a transit agency bring to the people. It serves as a reminder to me that I do not necessarily have to be employed in an issue area to make an impact upon it.

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My primary project for the summer internship was to create a driver appreciation draft document to be shared with the Regional Transit Partnership. This project can lead to significant impacts upon the driver pool in the region, and I appreciate that the PDC entrusts interns with this type of project. In future situations when I am tasked with attempting to solve or rectify a challenge facing multiple organizations, I know that I will be able to look back at this project and see what worked, what I could have done differently, and how stakeholder collaboration improved the end result. I am hopeful that the final product will be useful and can bring more collaboration to the hiring and retention of drivers among local transit providers. In reflection, the only thing that gives me pause is that I could have prioritized my time better while large amounts of data were collected by the providers, who are often working with limited resources and ample competing priorities. Nevertheless, I know that this project could lead to improved workplace morale, better hiring practices, and increased bus frequency that benefits myself and all other residents of the area.

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The application for the USDOT RAISE Grant is something I greatly appreciate having the opportunity to work on. Again, it shows that the TJPDC values their interns in that they trust them with editing and drafting information for a vital project that may benefit the experience of everyone who passes through Charlottesville Union Station. I also value this experience because of my future goal of being a grant writer. Whether it be as a member of an organization or as a freelancer, I think grant writing will provide me the best opportunity to have an enormous impact upon communities and the organizations that serve them. It was this experience that helped me land my fall internship at a grant consulting firm in Washington, DC, and I plan on using this experience as a foundation for many other opportunities to come.

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The peer cities project provided a nice reprieve for when the driver appreciation project seemed overwhelming or stalled. In my research I discovered that no silver bullet to the region's driver appreciation efforts existed. Nearly everyone is facing a shortage of operators and is looking for new ways to get staffing levels up to normal. I also struggled to find any significant articles on school bus operators or services similar to the structure of JAUNT, as most were about each community's equivalent to CAT. Despite the challenges many other places face, some are innovating in areas like fare-free transit, electric bus operations, and combining agencies to provide more robust service, and several of our peer cities I identified would make for interesting representatives for a spring speaker series for the RTP.

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As I wrap up this internship and finalize the driver appreciation report, I'm thankful for the opportunity to work with Jessica and the rest of the TJPDC team on issues that matter in the lives of many in our community. The collaboration that exists between government officials, agency leaders, and community members is enough evidence for me that the transit system in the region may not be perfect, but the team behind it will ensure its success over the long term.