Part I: Planning My Trip

The Flint Hills Area Transportation Agency (ATA) is a regional transit provider that serves Kansas State University. Over two years, I led two efforts to supply ATA with Student Governing Association (SGA) monies.

ATA's budget—a composite of federal, state, city, and university funding—suffered severe cuts in 2020 and has yet to rebound. Unlike other transit providers, ATA does not have a dedicated tax; instead, it receives allocations subject to annual change. In August 2023, these vulnerabilities brought an end to zero-fare service for K-State students and faculty.

Public transportation is a necessity. At its weakest, it provides access to basic necessities for those who (due to cost or disability) cannot drive; at its strongest, it offers all a cheaper, safer, healthier, faster, and more sustainable way to move.

The purpose of this portfolio is to organize the trajectory of my relationship with ATA: catalog my work, explain how my thinking has changed, and offer next steps. My central premise is that transit services will have greater resources if they are narrowly marketed toward the priorities of non-users.

This map is my attempt to note the financial relationships explained in subsequent parts. Each "Stop" represents an organization, committee, or department directly involved in the allocation or distribution of funds. Each "Route" represents a transfer of funds from one body to another.

Part II: Missing My Bus

I learned of ATA's impending shortfall when agency officials spoke to the student legislature in October 2022. To explore the idea of a student transportation fee, I recruited a small team of students to form the ATA Student Advisory Board (informally, the "Bus Club").

I sought a "big tent" message—students who wanted accessible transportation, students who wanted affordable transportation, sustainable transportation, efficient transportation, and so on. I believe that almost anyone can find a reason to support transit. I *believed* that each reason strengthened our argument.

Throughout the winter, I collected trends in ridership, operating cost, demand, and fees at peer institutions. I spoke to students and university staff who represented high-transit-share populations. (international students, first-year students, and students with disabilities). I asked the board to determine its priorities, then I used them to shape funding packages of varying size with ATA officials.

The board deliberated these packages and determined that a $10-per-student fee (enough to maintain zero-fare service) would best serve K-State's needs. I recorded the board's findings, analysis, and recommendation in **this final report**, which became an official student transportation fee proposal to the Student Services Fee Committee in February 2023.

They rejected it. Not only the board's recommended package, but all of the options offered in the report. My team's library of reasons to support ATA was insufficient to compel the decision makers.

Part III: New Routes

Before long, a new group sought support from the Student Services Fee Committee—Cats' Cupboard, the campus food pantry.

Cats' Cupboard had operated in the basement of an administrative building since its creation in 2017 but received a surprise donation for a new facility that opened in 2023. The new space had exploded their demand and cost of operation.

This year, I was a member of the Student Services Fee Committee. Cats' Cupboard's request came at the penultimate hour—the Student Governing Association closes its term in March. If we wanted to support them, we would have to make a decision in less than a week.

Unfortunately, Cats' Cupboard struggled to project its budget needs—it had been in the new facility for less than a year and had dramatic swings in month-to-month foot traffic. I was in favor of **this proposal**; but, recalling how I had been grilled, I thought they had little chance of success. I was wrong.

The Student Services Fee Committee approved $92,000 of the $150,000 requested by Cats' Cupboard. I was almost angry. I turned in my ATA proposal to the Student Services Fee a month and a half earlier on the calendar but was told I rushed. I knew what ATA needed to the cent, but I was told I needed more research.

It is reasonable to think that the Student Services Fee Committee was willing to forgive gaps in data, since Cats' Cupboard, a university unit, is easier to trust.

But I think the distinction is more fundamental: students value food more than they value transportation. Or, more accurately, students on the Student Services Fee Committee have an easier time understanding the impact of affordable food compared to affordable transportation.

Part IV: Reaching My Stop

I theorized that my original “big tent” approach was backwards. Rather than demonstrate the strength of public transportation, it seemed that an array of arguments only served to confuse the main message. To try again, I needed to pick one.

After Cats’ Cupboard’s success, I thought: why not food security? In fact, peers of mine had just researched the relationship between transit and food—they had data to prove that students at K-State cite transportation expense as a contributor to food insecurity.

So I set out for funding again. This time, a startup funding package from the Tuition Enhancements Committee. My idea was to pay for a stock of bus passes that could be offered for free at the Cats’ Cupboard facility. Bet on the winning horse, I guess?

Compared to my first attempt, this application experience was otherworldly. The Tuition Enhancements Committee scrutinized **this proposal**, to be sure, but were eager for an opportunity to build on SGA’s investments in food security. They understood the premise of the proposal with ease. After a month of review, they approved funding in full.

Why did this attempt to fund ATA succeed where the other had failed? The straightforward explanation is that the amount of cash was an order of magnitude less to stomach. There are other factors that may have contributed to a warmer climate for investing. First, pushback from students at the institution of bus fares; second, increases in ATA funding from the City of Manhattan.

I felt, though, that this success was strong evidence in favor of my hypothesis.

Part V: The Next Trip

Food security matters to students at K-State. What matters to administrators? My instinct is “cost”.

K-State now in the process of reimagining its transportation system under the *Next Gen K-State Campus Master Plan.* I was invited to serve on the Transportation and Mobility focus group of this plan. The discussion in that focus group was dominated by the state of campus parking and its various maladies.

K-State cannot build more parking without raising parking pass prices. In fact, it may be forced to raise parking pass prices anyway. My sincere opinion is that ATA is the only way for K-State to spend less money and offer more capacity at the same time.

Transit is absolutely a cost-saving option. It requires upfront investment, but so did parking. Transit is cheaper because it moves more people with less space and less fuel. Transit is cheaper because it requires an order of magnitude less vehicle shortage. Transit is cheaper because it does not demand that its users fuel, maintain, and insure assets before they can take part in the system.

If I ever want K-State to commit to a greater transportation vision, now is the time. **This letter** is my attempt to articulate the cost argument.