

## **GRTC**

### **Interview: Eldridge Coles**

Laura Browder: Why don't we start off by you telling me about your childhood. Tell me something about how you grew up, where you grew up...

Eldridge Coles: Ok. I, uh, grew up in Richmond, Virginia, uh.... Uh, in the west end of Richmond, near Byrd Park. In the B--Byrd Park area. Uh, lived there most of my life until I got married, and... I think it's about, uh... oh, God, this is terrible. My wife would kill me now if I can't think of when... got married. I think it was... 1970. Been married for forty-two years. Have one child. Uh, one daughter. Uh, three grandkids. Uh... that's pretty much it [chuckles.]

LB: [Laughs] Tell me about where'd you go to school, what was it like growing up?

EC: Well, uh--uh, again, I grew up in the West End. I, uh... I attended, uh... Sydney School at, uh, when I first started school. Uh, then I went to, uh... Maymont (?) School. Then, uh... uh, Randolph. Then Maggie L. Walker. Uh... then after that [chuckles] I came to GRTC.

LB: And tell me about... how you came to work at the GRTC, tell me about your training, and... tell me about what you remember from your early days of work.

EC: Uh, I started with GRTC in 1967. Uh, so I've been at GRTC--May the tenth of, uh, this

year... I been with GRTC for forty-seven years. Ok? And I started as a bus operator. Uh... and I drove a bus for, uh, seven years. Uh, and then I was asked to be a, uh, street supervisor. Part-time street supervisor. So I worked that job... for... I guess maybe a little over a year. Uh, then I was, uh, promoted to a permanent, uh... street supervisor. Worked that, I worked as a dispatcher, worked as training supervisor. Uh... worked as the director of, uh, charter department. Uh... let's see, then I was promoted to director of scheduling with GRTC. I wrote all their schedules, uh-- bus schedules for GRTC. Or for number three--[laughs] so with a big eraser on the end. Um... then I was asked by, uh, Rollo Axton (?), who was the CEO at that time... to, uh, be the... COO. Chief Operating Officer. Under him. And I worked, uh, with Rollo, I guess for... about five or six years. And then after that Rollo left. And he went to Fairfax, uh, Virginia. Took a job in Fairfax. And, uh, John Lewis came in at that time. Uh--

LB: And what years were these?

EC: ...from Baltimore. Uh... I can't remember those years...

LB: Approximately, iffy, eighties, nineties... two-thousands...

EC: Uh... that was in the... uh, I guess the early 2000. Around... a... around ninety... eight, ninety-nine, two-thousand. Somewhere in--in--in that... that timeframe. And I worked, uh, that I guess for about five or six years. Uh, after that, John left, took a job in Orlando. Uh... Orlando, Florida. And I was, uh, promoted to, uh, CEO of GRTC. Been in this job for... about three years--three or four years, here. As, uh, as the CEO. I worked every job here at G...RTC. Uh, from

sweeping the floor to... to, uh, CEO. Um... I used to always say 'from the back of the bus to the head of the corporation' [laughs]... GRTC.

LB: Well, tell me more about that, because... you know, one of the things that's striking me as you're talking--

EC: Mm hmm.

LB: ...first of all, I'm thinking about when you grew up in Richmond -- right?

EC: Mm hmm.

LB: You went to segregated schools.

EC: Yes. Yes.

LB: Right? You grew up literally sitting at the back of the bus.

EC: Right.

LB: You joined the GRTC--Bruce Korusek sent me a photograph of his class of 1965 training--

EC: [Laughs] Oh, God...

LB: And it was all white men except for one white woman and two African American men.

EC: Yeah.

LB: ...in that training class. So you must've been among the first African American operators.

EC: I... I--I was. And, uh, you know, I--I'd never had any problem [out/up] there, you know, most of the... uh, customers were friendly. You know. Uh... the caucasians or the white customers were--they--the--they were friendly, uh... it was an honor. At that time. To be a bus operator. You know, it was, uh... was an--was an honor to be a bus operator. Uh, they don't know it but I would've worked for half the price. Half of the salary. [Laughs.] Um...

LB: How did you get the job in the first place?

EC: Well, I had a friend that, uh... uh, drove bus and he told me that they were hiring. And I came up and, uh... I, uh... filled out a application to--to drive the bus. James Woody, uh, was the, uh, assistant, uh, director of transportation at that time. And he hired me--each department hired their own employees so you know how long that would... uh, that--that--a long--how long ago that was. We didn't even have an HR department. You know, if you were in scheduling, then you would hire--scheduling would hire their, uh... you know, employees, uh... uh, maintenance department, they would hire their own. So there was no, uh, HR department. Uh... the interesting thing I like to tell people is that I never applied for any position. ...None. Other than being a bus

operator. Every position that I was asked to take on or promoted to, they came to me. And they asked me to, uh... to consider, uh... the position. You know, so... that's how it happened. You know. It's been good. It's been good. Uh... [laughs]... uh... you did, as a black bus operator, uh, run into some... prejudice. Out there. But, you let it roll off... you know. Roll of your, uh... your back. Um... I used to always say, well, from the point where they were picked up [at?] the-- somewhere between that point--point A and point B, they were--they were gone. They had to get off. So... you know. You live with it. You know. But, uh...

LB: Someone was telling me, uh... last week when we were interviewing that... when the GRTC first started hiring African American operators, the police would get phone calls saying a black man has stolen a bus.

EC: [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: [Laughing] Yes. Kinda hard to drive a bus from the... from the back of the bus--to reach the steering wheel from the back of the bus. But, uh... [laughs] yeah. I can imagine that happened. Uh... but, uh...

LB: What kind of training did you get in those early days and what do you remember about your first days of operating the bus?

EC: Well... at that time, uh... it was, like, about three weeks of training. Training period was about three weeks. Uh, you had to go out and, uh, about a week of classroom. And then about two weeks or maybe a little bit better of behind the wheel... uh... training. You would have to go out with a--a--what we call a line instructor. And you would work the route with him or her all day long. And then after you got off from that, you would have to go out and you would, uh... have to ride a route. You wouldn't be assigned a route until you covered... uh, all of the routes that GRTC covered. But back in those days when I started, it wasn't GRTC. It was VTC. Virginia Transit Company. And, uh... in nineteen-seventy... three, I believe it was, three... uh, nineteen-seventy-three, seventy-four... is when the city, uh... took over the transit company. VTC left. And the city, um, purchased, uh, the bus company. So it was VTC when I started. ...Mm hmm.

LB: And you've been in... just such an incredibly unusual position. To not only start as an operator, but to occupy, as you say, every single position and end up at the CEO.... So... could you reflect for a little while, just free-associate on... what that experience has been like and also some of the changes that you've seen at the GRC--TC, because, gosh... I mean, you've been here so long--

EC: Forty-seven years.

LB: ...that you have seen a lifetime worth of changes. A career's--more than a career's worth of changes, and you've seen the organization from every single different vantage point, I would imagine.

EC: ....Yes... um... you know, there's nothing bad I can really say about it, you know--

LB: I don't mean you have to say anything bad [laughs].

EC: It's--it's--it's--it--it's--it's been a--it's been great experience, you know, uh--

LB: Yeah.

EC: I don't think one single thing that happened in those forty...seven years that, uh... uh... I would've changed. As far as the experience is, uh, concerned. You know, it's--it's--it's been a great run. I'm gonna leave here this year. This is gonna be, uh, uh... my last year. I'm... I tell people I'm--I'm taking on another job. Uh, the pay is terrible but the rewards are great. I'm gonna be spending a lot of time with my three grandsons. So... uh, I'm looking forward to that. Uh, to doing that. Um... GRTC, to me, is.... It's very rewarding when... uh, I can ride down the street and see people who need transportation standing on the corners or in the shelters waiting on buses. Or our care service people who are, uh, have a disabilities, uh... using our care service, you know. I--I think it's... I think it's wonderful. You know. I wouldn't change anything about that. You know, only thing I would like to do is just... make it better. I always say if I can do one--if I can do one thing--if I have done one thing... to, uh... make this service better or make it, uh... uh... more rewarding for our customers, you know, I... I--I get all the pleasure in the world. Outta that. You know. I'm gonna miss it.

LB: During your years as an operator, what were the best... things about your job, what were the worst things about your job?

EC: Best things about my job--I met my wife on the bus!

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: [Laughing] when I was a bus operator.

LB: Tell me about that.

EC: Um... I used to drive, uh, the 32 Ginter Park route and she used to ride that bus. And... I used to pick her up every morning, taking her to work, and, uh... started talking and... now it's been forty-seven years--forty-two years later and we... still talking. Most of the time.

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: Yeah. Um... she was working for the, uh, phone company. Uh, as the, uh... as an operator, then she went into, uh, engineering with, uh... with the phone company. So, uh... every morning, I looked forward to picking her up and coming up 7th street and she would be standing in the window at the... phone company there at 7th and Grace and she'd wave. And I'd wave, so... you know, that--



LB: That's nice!

EC: That--that... that was incentive to come to work [laughs]. Yeah. Uh, you know, when I started... in sixty-seven, I think the pay was about, uh... little over \$2 per hour. You know, uh, pay. And I thought that was all the money in the world, you know, I... that was good money back then. In those days. Uh... so, uh... the equipment is a lot better now, uh... than it was when I was operating, uh... uh, the bus. I think the fare might've been about twenty-five cents or something like that. Um... we used to have to sell a whole--what we call 'weekly passes.' We sold tokens, uh.... I remember my first day, uh... first day, uh... uh, driving the bus, I... came in--I guess I--I woke up that morning about two hours early, put on my uniform. Man, I was ready to go. I sit on the side of the bed looking at the watch. Uh, waiting to come there to drive that big bus. And I--I--I--I try to reflect back on everything that, uh... uh... uh, my trainer, uh... told me to do. You know. Got up, so I--I--I think I got to work about a hour, hour-and-a-half early. Uh... went to the windows, asked for my transfers. And the guy gave me my transfers. I said, 'now they told me that I have to go out to this barn over here, and I have to look on the board and find my bus, what bus number I have. And the location.' Ok, so... I went over and did that. Found the bus. Got in there and started--got the lights on, started the bus up, I said, 'now, they told me, you know... never, uh--had to--have at least ninety pounds of air pressure. And never use over more than--never use more than one-third throttle when building the--the air pressure.' So I did that, I set my signs, and I guess I sit there for another forty minutes, waiting for--

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: ... waiting for time to leave. And the first route I drove was the Riverview 10. Riverview 10 route. And that operated from the, uh, West End, near Maymont Park. over to, uh, Church Hill, Crayton Road (?) and that area. So, uh... when time came for me to leave, I pulled out, went on over Church Hill, picked up people, I thought this was the greatest thing since cake and ice cream. I drove from Church Hill back to the West End, picking up people... said, '*man*, they don't know... I... I've... do this for half-price.' You know. And drove back to, uh, Church Hill. Coming back out of Church Hill, looked like the people started coming out of the woodworks, you know. And they would get on the bus there and I'd shut the door and get ready to pull off-- 'no, no, no, no, I just wanna buy a pass,' or 'I just want some tokens.' Ok. And at that time we were carrying money, so I was taking money and stuffing in my pocket. Got back to the West End and they were standing up around my neck. [Laughs] I said, 'God, is this the way it's gonna be? [Laughs] you know...

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: But, uh... I--I--I remember that. That was, uh... that was good. And... but, uh, you know, didn't have problems on the bus. You know, you got to know all your customers. Uh, sometime, uh... you know, uh... you'd pull up to a corner if you didn't see your customer that... rode with you regular. You'd wait, you'd look up and down the street or you would... uh... stop in front of their house. Or whatever, and wait for them to come out. And a lot of times they would stand on the porch and wave, say 'I'm not going to work today,' you know. 'So you go on.' So you--you, you know... uh, you--you got to know your customers at Christmastime, they would come out

with... all kinda gifts and... cakes and pies, and... you got back to the garage there, you had to pull your car up to the bus to... unload all the goodies that they there--

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: That they brought you. Um... I miss the people. You know. I'm--I miss the people. I think... operating the bus is about one of the best jobs here.... You know, you... you--you--you go around... you--you might work the same route every day. But every time you go around at, uh, that circle, there's something different. You know, there's something different... *every...time*. If there was a problem on the bus, you didn't have to say anything, your customers would... say, 'no... uh-uh, you're not gonna do that on Eldridge's bus. You're not gonna do that on Mr. Coles' bus. He's a good operator. You leave him alone.' You didn't have any problems. You know. So that--that was good.... Uh... I miss that. I miss that. Uh... but, uh... I guess I'm a people person. I love the people here.... Uh, I--I love the operators, I love the mechanics, and I always tell them, you know, hey... you.... it's you that make GRTC. It's the operators, it's the mechanics. They can do without me. If I don't show up for a week or a month. Don't make any difference. You know, the bus is gonna run. You know, they--they... the--the bus is going to be there. You know, it's--it's--it's not me, you can make all the rules... you can come up with [drawn out] *all...* the ideas that you think are great. But unless you got the proper people in place, to carry out those ideas and those thoughts, they don't mean nothing. You know. So, I give all the credit to the, uh, operators and mechanics, they're the meat of the company. You know. They what make GRTC. The customers out there, they don't know me. You know, per se. They--might see me sometime. But who they do know is that operator who they depend on every morning to pick 'em up, carry

'em to work, carry 'em to doctor, um... carry 'em to wherever they--they need to go, to school or whatever. Those are the people that they know. You know, that... that's the GRTC that the... that our customers know. Not me.

LB: GRTC seems like a really unusual company in so many ways. I mean, unusual in Virginia, in that... you all have been unionized... from the first.

EC: Mm hmm.

LB: Unusual in the way that the operators feel about the company. Unusual in the--the kinda loyalty... it seems like the employees here... feel.

EC: It--it--it--it--it is. Uh, it is a very unusual place. I--I--I think--it's not like any other transit company that I visit. You know, I've... been to transit companies throughout the, uh... throughout the country. And, uh, I sit around and what I like to do when I go to a new property is go back to the operator's room. And just sit there and listen to them. And their experiences, not even say anything, just... just listen. You know, and, uh... I come back home here to GRTC and I said, man, we really got it made here, you know. Uh... it's--it's--it's--it's a different world, you get to know the people, you get to know their kids, uh... uh, you get to know them through the good times, through the bad times. Uh, speaking of the labor, uh, union co--union. Yeah, it's just a union, uh... union shop, it's uh... it's always been a... union. Uh... but... the relationship between, uh, the union [America?] made it, uh, twelve-twenty union. It's very, very good, uh... last year we negotiated a three-year, uh, contract. We didn't call anyone from the outside to, uh,

work with my staff. And, uh, the union board and--we settle a three-year contract. Uh... which is very unusual, without bringing in lawyers, uh... uh, mediators, uh... or whatever. We did it among ourselves. And we did it in... in a week's time. Yeah. Which was--I'm very proud of that.

LB: Well, I'm just smiling because I understand that there'd been a two-year period with no contract before you came in.

EC: There--there--there was a two-year period with no contract... uh... but... one of the first things I did when I came in--and it wasn't a contract, it was to give them all an increase in pay. I, uh... gave all of the employees, hourly employees a... a instant, uh, increase in pay. Uh... I reestablished their [two allowance?] for the m--uh, maintenance, uh... mechanics. Gave them back that, gave them back their uniform allowance. I think, uh... uh, by doing that all that help us so when it--when we did get to negotiations. And--and you know, uh, one of the things I think, too, is that... uh, and so I think... [laughs] I don't wanna throw [??], but I think they have a lot of respect for me because I came through the ranks. They can relate... uh, to me. I think I'm last of a dying breed. I don't think it, uh... probably won't happen anymore. But, uh... to walk-- [laughs]... and sit where... they are or have been, you know, uh... I think is, uh... you get a lot of respect that way. I know that, uh... I had mentioned to the, uh... operators and mechanics that, uh, I was going to retire. That was... last year, year before last, one or the other. They took up a petition. Ok, which, uh... they took up a petition and they [laughs]--they came to a board meeting and presented it to the GRTC board [slowly] 'We don't want him to leave.' And, I tell you, that really made me feel good, I think it was very... very unusual. Usually they wanna get rid of you [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: So, but, uh, they--they did that. And I--I think I still got the, uh... the petition that they, uh... the signatures that they--they took a [marker?] probably [have it?]. But, uh, you know, I--uh--try to have a open door, uh, relationship with them. You know, if it's important to them... it's important for me to listen. You know. I don't come through that door downstairs there and walk by anybody and not speak to them. You know, so I--[laughs] a lot of times I have to look out the window, I tell [Chambliss? Chandler?], look out the window, see if anybody out there so I can get a... car and leave if I got somewhere to go in a hurry. But if they wanna talk about, uh, work, we can talk about work. If they wanna talk about their kids, you know, we can talk about their kids. Uh... if they wanna talk about sports, fishing, anything else, you know--if it's important to them... it's important for me to, uh, listen. And I think, uh... I think I get a lot of respect that way. You know. Um... again, they're the meat of the company. They're what make GRTC work. You're making me teary-eyed, because, uh, like I said, you know, I'm getting ready to leave here. I--I'm gonna miss [sniffles]... you know, I... I, uh... I--I... I tell them I've been a bridge. I... been a bridge to, uh... to a lot of them. You know, uh... um... that they had to walk across. You know and I laid there for them to walk across. You know. And after they walk across, I got up and I was happy to lay there for them. You know, to be there for them. I... trying to under--if you understand what I'm trying got, uh... trying to say. Uh, because after all, they got families, they got kids, this is their livelihood. Uh... this is how they take care of their family, pay their bills. So it's important to... to them. That they be... treated and listened to. Fairly. Uh... I'm gonna miss them.

LB: Well it's really clear... how much they're gonna miss you, I mean everyone that I've interviewed has talked about how important... you are to them and what you've done... has been so... important to them [phone ringing].

EC: Oooh, God. I'm sorry about that. [Ringing.] I'm sorry.

LB: Oh, that's fine.

[Pause.]

EC: Should've cut that thing [off/out?].

LB: Tell me--you know, you said earlier... that when you visit all these other transit companies, the GRTC is really... a different feeling. How do you... how do you account for that, because... again, I'm gonna play devil's advocate for just a moment and say, well... transit company and transit company -- how can it be that Richmond has such a different kind of experience, because... just walking in here, you know, from the first time I met Steven McNally (?) and heard him talk about the GRTC... to coming here for meetings and... meeting with all of these operators--current and retired... it's really clear that there's something... very, very unusual going on that doesn't have to do with the way corporate America functions, doesn't have to do with the way most workplaces work. What... is it? What is it?

EC: I--I thi--I--I think, uh, uh, uh... you have to show them that you care. You know. Never lie to them. You know, you tell them the truth, whether it be good, bad, or indifferent. You tell them... the truth. You know. And... uh... as long as you do that, you're ok. It may not always be what they wanna hear, but it's the truth. You know, you--you have to remember a lie, you don't have to remember the truth because the truth is the truth. You know.

LB: But it's tough, I would think, in a time when... you know, the GRTC is getting cutbacks? Is getting funding cuts, I mean, the economy has been tough. I know that you've had to cut back... on routes, had to cut back on hours. And that's difficult.

EC: But did--but we did not cut off--we did not cut back in our, uh, hourly staff. All of that was done in management. You know, and, uh... salary personnel. Uh, we--we... we didn't lay off one operator. Or one mechanic. You know. None of those folks were effected. You know. Uh, staff did not get a--increase in pay. They did. You know, we cut back so that we could take care of them. You know. Not one got laid off. You know. Uh, like I said, you know, we try to figure out a way that we could give them an increase. Uh, without the union coming to us and asking... us to do it. You know, because, uh... we wanted them to feel like, hey... you haven't received the increase and pay in two or three years. You know. Uh... where I recognize that, you know, your expenses go up as well. So we wanna show you that, uh, you know, we appreciate the job you do. We're gonna bite the bullet. We're gonna do whatever we [laughs]--we have to do. Uh, but we're going to, uh, sh--try to show you that we care. May not be as much as you may want. But it's--it's something.



LB: Well... I know that... you know, from talking to the operators, what that meant because... you know, I've had operators talk to me about... the strike of '75--

EC: [Laughs.]

LB: ... that went on for forty-five days. Cuz you must've been in--

EC: I--I--I was here.

LB: You--you were among the ninety percent in the union, I assume. All the way through, yes?

EC: Yes--un--until management.

LB: Well, until management, when you couldn't. But...

EC: But, uh... but seven--seven years, uh, that I... was a bus operator, yes, I was... union.

LB: And I know... how... much they resented it when their uniform allowance did get eliminated.

EC: Right.

LB: And what other things were changed around.

EC: Right.

LB: And so I'd imagine to have those things back...

EC: Mm hmm. Without asking for them.

LB: Without asking for them.

EC: Mm hmm.

LB: That's huge.

EC: Yeah, I--I think it was. And, uh... I--I--again, I think it went a long way... of showing them that we care. Uh... we care about you. That you're... very important to this company. You *are* the company. On their pay stubs, they--'you are the transit system.' You know. You--you're GRTC. And they are.

LB: And I would also think... super unusual to have the CEO come from... being an operator--

EC: Yes [laughs].

LB: ...has that--happened to anyone else?

EC: I think this is about the first [laughs]. I think it's about the first and it's probably [laughing] gonna be about the last. But it, uh, it--it--it, uh.... You know, I always believed in promoting within. Give them something to work... for. Something to see. Uh... hey, I can do that, too. You know, uh... or whatever. Most of our supervisors come from--operators' ranks. Most of our shop [appointments?] come from the mechanics, uh, rank. Whenever we can, you know... I like to see that happen. You know, it's... it... it's--it's encouraging to, uh, the employees, it makes them want to do a good job. Um... I used to tell the union that, uh... you know, if I decided I wanna be union president, you're gonna be plumb outta luck. That's what I told--told the union president. Um... most of the time -- a lot of the time -- they'll come to me before they'll go to the union.

LB: That's interesting.

EC: Yeah. And I have to tell them, '... go back... go back. Go through the chain. And it'll get to me. Then we'll talk about it. Ok?' But a lot of times, uh... again, the--the rel--the rel--working relationship with the union I can... usually work it out, we can work it out.

LB: Cuz it sounds like even the operators relationship with the union has been kinda up and down... over the years.

EC: Eh... yeah. Yeah, yeah... it--it--it has. But I think they got a strong, uh... union president now and I think he, uh.... I think, uh, he [has?] earned their respect. He... was a part-time bus

operator. Never full-time bus operator, he come from Reynolds... I believe, and he drove part--

LB: As a hobby! [Laughs.]

EC: Yeah. He drove part-time here for, I guess, about twenty years or better. [?] about twenty years. Never missed a day!

LB: That's what he said.

EC: You know, uh... never missed a day. Uh, and, uh, they voted him as, uh, as president of the... of the union. Frank Tunstall.

LB: I interviewed him and Julia Vidal.

EC: Oh yeah. Vidal. Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Good folks.

LB: Yeah. Yeah. Um...

EC: Good folks.

LB: So... what do you think the biggest challenges are now facing the GRTC?

EC: Huh. Money. Funding. Uh... funding. That's--that's our biggest challenge. Funding... and

the ability to, uh... uh... go in areas where... we don't currently operate. Uh...

LB: You mean the counties?

EC: The counties, yeah. Trying to get out in the counties, because that's where the jobs are. We know where the people want to go, we know where the jobs are, but we just can't... do it. You know, uh... we need regional cooperation. Between the jurisdictions. Between Chesterfield is, uh... a fifty-percent owner of GRTC as you know. Uh... this year, they have, uh... contributed to, uh... uh... couple of routes in Chesterfield and I think the relationship, uh, between, uh... Richmond and Chesterfield, as far as transit is concerned, is getting better. Henrico have always, uh, had transportation there. Uh... we have, uh... uh... four, five express routes out there. Couple of local routes out in Chesterfield. I mean, Henrico. Uh, they been a good... partner with, uh, GRTC. Uh... Chesterfield is beginning to, uh... see the need for transportation... there. Uh, and I hope that, uh... that will continue. I believe it's... I believe it will continue.

LB: It's kind of amazing, don't you think, that ever since annexation -- it's what, over forty years now? -- the counties have been... so... reluctant?

EC: [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: I don't know. You know, I--I--I--I--I talked to, uh... uh... some of the transportation people

in Chesterfield. And I--I--I guess it's just like... anywhere else, they have... budget that they have to... uh... uh... operate within. You know. Uh, this year, again, they, uh... did pony up, uh... funds to keep a couple of the express routes, uh, operating out there in Chesterfield. Uh... hopefully, uh... that will grow.

LB: But you know, ever since I moved to Richmond in 1994--

EC: Mm hmm.

LB: Everyone's been talking about 'we need more regional cooperation.'

EC: We do.

LB: And, it's been almost twenty years now.

EC: Mm hmm. We--

LB: Right? What...what do you think is gonna really get everyone... to the table for some... you know, just... absolutely meaningful kinds of cooperation. And I... say that meaning absolutely no disrespect towards what you've done because clearly you've made strides, but it's.... it's a problem with so much history behind it and... there are so many people who seem kinda intractable on... as far as that goes. How... how are you gonna make the big change?

EC: It's the politicians. It's the politicians. They need to sit down... and... get their act together. They need to sit down and talk with each other. I don't know, uh... how much communication there is, uh... between the different jurisdictions, as far as, uh... working together. Uh... some of the leaders that I talk to said that they are on that track of doing that, hopefully... uh... hopefully that--that will happen. You know. I... uh... m--I definitely hope that will happen. That's what we need. The other thing we need, some type of dedicated funding. You know. Uh, we have no... dedicated funding. WE--we receive our funds from the city of Richmond, uh... the state, the federal government, and the jurisdictions in which we operate service. We... we got one route that, uh... that Petersburg contributes to. The two in Chesterfield that I--that I told you-- Chesterfield contribute to those two routes this... this year. Uh, and those in Henrico County. But what we need is, uh, uh, uh, some type of dedicated... funding... source. We need some, uh... need to set up like a transit authority. To... where we can... go... without... uh... any interruption [laughs]. For lack of a better words, I guess.

LB: Isn't it unusual not to have a transit authority--I mean, other cities I've lived in and visited... they all seem to have transit authorities. Is... is this unusual? Does it have to do with the size of the city or a particular history or--or what is that all about?

EC: ...We have to convince the politicians of the need. You know. That--that's what it is. And it's above my pay grade.

LB: Right.

EC: You know. Uh, we have to convince them... uh... the need for transportation. You know, uh, that it's... it--it--it--it--it...it's...it's more than, uh... just a... it's part of life. It's--it's, uh... the importance of it. You know, uh, you.... you... you ride up and down some of these roads and the cars are just bumper to bumper. You come down the expressway, it's bumper to bumper. They have to realize that, uh... you know, every time you see a bus, that's potential of forty cars not being on that road. You know, if they--on that... on that bus, you know, we have to think about the environment. You know. Uh... it--transit is such a good deal. You know, if you live way out in Chesterfield, you're gonna pay... dollar seventy-five, almost two dollars to, uh... on toll to get from Chesterfield to downtown and you're gonna pay that going back. You know. When you can ride the bus for three dollars. You know. You're not burning any gas, you're not polluting the air. Uh... you... you know, it... it... you saving money. You helping the environment, you're doing it all. You know. Uh... we have to convince the... the politicians of that. I think the riders, uh... understand that because, uh, when, uh... when there was a possibility of those two routes in Chesterfield going away, I mean, they really came out to... talk to their, uh, supervisors, and... write letters and... everything else, trying to, uh, keep that service out there. And it--and it--and they did. Uh, I think they listened. And they decided that they would, uh... fund those two routes. So...

LB: How do you think Richmonders who don't ride the GRTC... see the GRTC?

EC: [Pauses.] How do [laughing] see the GRTC.

LB: I--



EC: I--I--I--I think some of them think it's a... a necessary evil. Uh... it's hard to get people out their cars. You know. Uh... it's just hard to get people out of their cars. Uh, I think some people think we get in the way. You know, in the traffic. Um...

LB: Although it's funny cuz you know... I lived in Boston, I lived in Providence a long time, and there, everyone takes public transit. I was out in Denver recently.

EC: Mm hmm.

LB: And a lot of people commute from Boulder to Denver or vice versa. No one drives a car,--

EC: Ok.

LB: ...You get out onto that highway, it's pretty empty. Everyone's on the bus.

EC: Right. Right. Again, it's funding. You know. It's funding and cooperation. Those are the two major things. Funding and cooperation. Uh... we started, uh, I guess this is the... second--this is the third year--we started a Kings Dominion service. From Richmond to, uh, Kings Dominion and back. It's one of the most successful service that we started. Uh, start up in the last... ten years, I'd say. Uh... it pretty much take care of itself. Uh, the ridership is great. You know. Uh... I was--I received a call... from a certain... county. Wanting to know... who gave you permission--uh, how did you get permission to, uh... to, uh... start this service. How did you get

permission to... come through our county, uh... without, uh... talking to us. I thought that ninety-five was a interstate highway. Anybody can go up and down it. Uh, I didn't know that I needed permission to... to do that, you know. But, uh... Again, it's been a very good service, uh... it, uh... created a lotta... summer jobs for... kids. You know, to get 'em off the street. Uh... show 'em what real life is all about, the working experience. The mayors, uh, youth academy, I think they... they got about a hundred kids out of the mayor's youth--youth circ-- youth academy... that's working up at Kings Dominion. It's my understanding that they're gonna hire more. It's been a good partnership with, uh, Kings Dominion and GRTC. I think Kings Dominion might've been a little resistant at first, but now they--they realize that, uh... uh... it's-- it's been a good thing for them as well. Uh... it's bringing them a lot of, uh, employees up there. You know, uh... And a lot of visitors to the part that, uh... otherwise didn't have transportation to get there, so it's been a win-win, I think, for the city. It's been a win-win for the, uh... Kings Dominion and... it still is as far as summer jobs and things like that. It created... opportunities for the kids that... otherwise they would've have had.

LB: Do you think you'll be able to find a way to extend that model to other places, cuz it seems like there are so many shopping malls out there in the counties.

EC: Mm hmm.

LB: Where it would be incredibly helpful for Richmond youths if they could jump on a bus--

EC: I'd be ready to do it tomorrow if they'd let me.

LB: Yeah. I'm sure you would be, but... I guess what I'm asking is, do you think you'll be able to use that Kings Dominion experience--

EC: Model.

LB: ... as a way of, you know, the thin end of the wedge....

EC: Uh... I think, uh... I think that the... the counties realize. You know. Uh, that it's a good thing, but again... money. That's what they tell me. Money. So I have to believe what they tell me [laughs]. You know, uh.... Again, we know. You know, I have people call all the time, why don't you operate a bus here, or why don't you, uh, extend this route there. Would love to do it. Would love to do it. But we're not allowed to [laughs] do it. It's like you got your hands tied--I tell people, GRTC is in a box. Ok. We're in a box. And getting out of that box is hell--excuse me, but getting out of that box is hell. We--we... we can't get out of that box without permission. You know, how many routes can you operate within this box? How can you grow? If you're not allowed to spread your wings, uh, extend your routes, uh, or whatever. How--how can you? I'd like to see a route operate from... far Chesterfield to Innsbrook. Uh... Short Pump. Uh... places like that. You know, uh... but... we can't do it. Without the money. And... the permission. Getting permission from.. the counties, uh... to do it. We can't do it. You know. We'd love to do it. You know. Uh... I think, uh... I think if we could, maybe we wouldn't need to ask for as much funding. Because, uh, the ridership would... increase. And it would be... help support itself. You know. Uh... it would help support itself. That's my, uh... that's my biggest worry.

You know. How much can you grow within this box. You know? Uh... let us do what we... what I think we're good at. You know. We have a planned apartment down there (?), we've got all kind of, uh... surveys and... all, and people wanna go. But we can't. You know, we can't. You know, uh... up and down Jefferson Davis highway, uh... people getting killed crossing... Jefferson Davis highway. Trying to get to a bus stop or walking to work. You know. There are people who walk the... couple miles to get to, uh, city limits to get a bus to get to work. You know, I know on Sundays, uh... and on holidays, Sundays, Saturdays... and holidays, uh, the bus stop at, uh, Willow Lawn. I've been up there and I've seen people get off the bus. I [?] went up there and just sit. And just watch. And... people get off the bus and walk two or three miles, west on broad and I asked a couple of them, I picked 'em up in the car, said, 'Look. We're you going.' 'We're going to work.' 'How far you work.' 'I work up at...' [laughs] Pemberton almost or--wherever. Uh... 'how you gonna get there.' 'I don't have any choice but walk.' You know. Those are people that wanna work. But can't get to work. Those are people that could be paying taxes. But can't because they can't get to work. You can't... if you... if you got a child... you know... and you gotta pay a babysitter... you know... you gotta take a taxi to work... uh, if you're making nine dollars... eight, nine dollars an hour... how you gonna do all that? You can't afford a car. You know, a lot of them can't afford a car. But I wanna work. But I can't get to the job. I can't afford to... I can't afford to go to work. If I don't work, I can't pay taxes. You know, then I become... depended on... the system. You know. Uh... they could be more productive as far as paying taxes and stuff like this [comes up? concerned?]. But... I sit there and watch people get off the bus, off the Broad Street 6 at Willow Lawn. And walk a mile and a half, two miles up Broad Street. In the winter time. In the summer in the heat. Those are people who wanna work. Who wanna go to work. You ride out there, there are help-wanted signs. You know. Uh... and

there's jobs available, I think, uh... I forgot the number of jobs they said that was... within a mile of... you know, surrounding... the--the city. A mile-and-a-half or two miles surrounding the city. That people can't get to. Uh, some of these major companies that's moving into the area, that's hiring... but unless you have a car... uh, you can't get there. They may not be the top paying jobs where... uh, people who have cars can, you know, get, uh.... But, uh... they're good jobs. Some of them--lot of them are good jobs, and people would work them if they could get the transportation to get there. They can't. You know. Um... that breaks my heart. You know. Uh... that... breaks my heart. It make me tear up. Uh... to know that... they would if they could, but they can't. You know, uh... I hope whoever sit at my seat... will continue that battle. Will continue to talk to... the powers to be. And, uh, maybe one day somebody will wake up and say, you know, uh, let's do it, let's give it a try. You know. Uh... That's the hardest part about my job. That's the hardest part.

LB: It sounds so hard because it sounds like, the people want it, the people need it. The will is within--there within the GRTC.

EC: Yeah. We can do it.

LB: I mean it's just... there's no reason.

EC: Uh... there was a certain area, I'm not gonna [laughs]... uh, we... we had grant money. To operate... bus route. Didn't have to pay a dime. Don't want it, get it outta here. Do not want it. Ok. That was an area that I sit [down? at?] at a meeting, and I think we... offered them... I think

almost four million dollars. Let us run this service, you don't have to pay.... You know. We got four million dollars that we're gonna put in for new.... new service. I thought that they were going to do it. When the vote came down... they turned it down. Ok, so what does that tell you.

LB: What reason could they possibly give for turning down four million dollars in grant money to get people to the jobs they need?

EC: I think they felt that after that four million dollars was gone [laughs]... then they would have to... help support it. You know. But, uh, they turned it down. Flat turned it down. Didn't give it a chance. Yeah... um... so those are the uphill challenges. That--that we--we--we face here. But we do a lot of good stuff, too. You know, we... we, uh... we try to spend the tax payers money as... as wisely as we possibly can. We're turn out fleet over to... CNG (?). Uh, to help reduce cost. Uh, I think right now we're paying... almost... let's see, two-some dollars, three dollars a... about two-eighty-six for a gallon of diesel. Uh, once we start CNG, it'll be about a dollar and something. You know, uh... for that. Uh, we're getting ready to build a, uh, CNG pumping station out here, will cost about five million dollars. Uh, we're purchasing a piece of property in the back, uh... the back, the... north end of this property. Where we're gonna move, uh, our... uh... care service back there. I hope to, uh... build a building, another building back there. This piece of property out here, out the front there where you see the vans are, we leased that from the church... [that?] next year, so we won't have to, uh... won't have that lease expense, that rent to pay. Uh, we did have a second piece of property that we were leasing from Dupont, down on--I guess you know about that--down on Commerce Road. We shut that down bout a couple of years back and we moved everything, uh... to here. I would say it's cheaper to operate one house than

it is two. Uh... but again, that piece of property back there, we'll... we'll own. So we won't have that expense. Uh... we're looking at, uh, bus rapid transit. We need a... we definitely need a transfer center. You know that--that's a big thing. I think GRTC, uh... we've got about... I guess about a hundred and... ten or fifteen... million dollar worth of projects out there. Uh, that we hope to do. Uh, it's about sixty-seven, sixty-eight million dollars for... VRTC... VR, uh, VRTC bus--rapid transit. Uh... then, uh, transfer center, which would be about, I guess about thirty, thirty-five... million. Uh... few other things that we're trying got do. We wanna do new fare boxes, uh, where people can use their debit cards, swipe... stuff like that. So we're looking forward. But again, we're still in that box. If we do all of those things, we're still in that box. We still need to grow. We still need to get out of that--that box. You know. Um...

LB: In other cities are doing it, that's the crazy thing.

EC: Other cities are doing it. Petersburg is... uh... is nowhere near the size of GRTC, they have a transfer center there. We don't. I think they have about... ten, twelve routes. You know. But they have transfer center. You know. We don't.

LB: And I know--I mean, everyone I talk to, including myself, there are so many times I'd like to take the bus someplace but because... there's no--

EC: Right. You gotta stand on the corner...

LB: ... easy way to do it. Well, and--and also, you know, because of the--the system, sometimes

it can take you an hour to get to work--

EC: True.

LB: ...when it could take twenty minutes to drive.

EC: True.

LB: And that's... tough and maybe if--

EC: It's true. You know, a lot of cities, you know, I--I--I been to, you don't even need a schedule.

You know, because the buses run... that regularly. You know, you don't even need a schedule.

LB: No.

EC: You know that every... eight, ten minutes, it's gonna be a bus. Or less.

LB: that's right.

EC: You don't even need a schedule. You know. Here, you miss a bus... you may have to wait forty... fifty minutes for another bus. You know. Is that what we wanna do? No. You know, when you cut routes... you lose customers. Ok. Uh, when your buses... runs so far apart, you lose customers. You know. Uh... but in order to keep... some service out there, that's what we



have to do. You know, I'd like to put... two or three more buses on every line, but we can't. Can't afford it. You know, uh, we got that budget and once we have that budget [laughs,] you know, we're.... we're lost. You know, we said it's, uh... it's two kinds of people that ride the bus. Those that--that gotta--the gotta's and the wanna's. [Laughs] what I mean by that is those who have no other no other choice. And those who just want that experience or... for one reason or another, to save money or to save parking, uh... uh, cost of parking and toll and stuff like that. But, uh... uh, we need, uh--I--I--I call the gotta's, uh, our foundation. That's what we're based on. You can't forget those... customers. You can't forget them. You gotta take care of them. Uh... the wanna's, we need them. We need those... uh, people. We want to, uh, make sure that they have a good experience on the bus so that they can go back... tell their neighbors, uh, tell their coworkers, uh... you know, uh, it's good. I enjoy riding the bus, I can sit on it... on the bus and I can use my, uh, computer, uh... I can sit back and relax, I can read the paper, I can do whatever, I don't have that cost of that... eighty, ninety dollars or whatever it is to park downtown. Uh... I don't have to pay the toll, I don't have the wear and tear on my car, uh... but we--the service have to be reliable. Have to be dependable. Uh, they have to know that it's there. Uh, every couple of years, the threat of service going away, you know, and you give up your parking space downtown and where you left. You know, so it's gotta be dependable, and it's gotta be reliable. And they gotta know that it--I mean, you know, the customer's just gotta know that it's gonna be there for them. You know. We do everything that we possibly can do to, uh... to make it that way. Could be bett--could it be better? Ohhh, yeah. It could be a whole lot better. Than what it is. You know. Uh, do we know how to make it better? Oh, yeah. We--we--we know what to do. You know. Can we do it? Not always. No. Uh, right now, uh, if we make a route change, we have to go to the city. And get permission to, uh, make that route change. Uh... go on a different street, we have

to get permission to do that. Uh... let us run the business. Let us do... what we think we know... how to do. You know. Uh... It could be a whole lot better than what it is. Not that it's bad! It's good compared to a lot of cities. Uh... uh, and--I think the state think we're good. You know. Uh... they wanted to use, uh... GRTC as a model. For some of their--some of their other trans--agencies. Transit systems. You know. Uh, we're very efficient in what we do. Uh, they say that we are... uh... uh... the city's been good. I got to applaud the city. But I realize that they don't have a money tree, neither. They need help. They need help from the surrounding... areas. Petersburg, they need help. The... counties around there as well. Petersburg [laughs] don't have the funds to do everything that they would like to do neither. But you take a lot of... their customers come from... not within the city of Petersburg, they drive into Petersburg and catch the... catch the bus into Richmond. But the counties that they live in... don't help. With the cost of that service. Don't help support it. You know.... it's what they need to do.

LB: What--what do you think it would take to get the kind of transit authority that is just... a no-brainer in so many other cities and regions? What would it take to get that here?

EC: Again [laughs], the--the--the--the--the politicians, the counties, the--these jurisdictions, they have to get together, they have to talk, they have to realize that, uh, uh, you can't build roads everywhere. You know, a man will tear down his house to build a road to drive his car on. You know, uh... when people talk about trans--when I hear a bill or something come through general assembly or something... uh, for transit, it--nine times out of ten, it's for roads. Ok? You know, we get the crumbs. You know. If there's any left ov--over, we might get a little piece of that. But, uh, there need to be, uh... there need to be more of an effort... to... improve transportation. To

fund transportation. To take some of that money and fund transportation. You know.... That's what we need.

LB: It's such a different mind-set from...

EC: Yeah.

LB: ...you know, when you travel outside of this country even.

EC: Yeah.

LB: And... people don't think you have to be in your car twenty-four seven.

EC: Right. Uh, you know, I've... seen cars come down the road, you know, like I said, one person in it. It's rare that you see two. And it's really rare if you see three. You know. That bus-- you know... if...a--a bus gets almost five miles per gallon of fuel. That sounds like very little. But when you take that five miles and you multiply that by forty, you're getting, [laughs] two-hundred and some miles per... gallon. When you take those other cars off the road. And you take those--those customers and you put on that bus. So that five miles per gallon of fuel... really... you multiply it by the number of cars that you take off the road and the number of people sitting ton that bus that could be driving a car... you know, you get a couple hundred miles per--per gallon. Of service, of, you know... travel. Outta there. You know, uh.... Those are the things that I think marketing work on a lot. Trying to get that over to the, uh... to the public. And they do a

good job at that. But it's a great place.

LB: It is!

EC: GRTC's a great place.

LB: It is. It's an amazing place.

EC: It is. It is. It is, we... we do the best we can with what we got.

LB: And it's pretty... it's pretty incredible to see, it's pretty incredible to sit here and... have the privilege of talking with people from the GRTC about their experiences because... I think most Richmonders just have no idea.

EC: They nave no idea whatsoever, you know. Uh.... I've had people come here and say, 'I had no idea all this go on.' They--they--they s--they see a bus on the street and somebody sitting behind the wheel, they think that's what it take. You know. Um... [laughs] I've had 'em to... call me and tell me, see you guys are... not doing this, you're not doing that. Now, there is the Bottom to the Back bus. Uh... you know what I'm talking about--

LB: Mm hmm.

EC: Uh, that runs, uh... you donate a fare or you--put something in the box or something. And,

uh... uh... they do an amazing job. And they do! They do a good job. At what they do. But this is totally different. Type of service. I can't take a bunch of--

LB: Drunk...

EC: ...school buses. [Laughs] Not drunks [laughs.]

LB: [Laughs] [?] college students.

EC: We get some of those, too.

LB: To the Bottom and Back [laughs].

EC: I can't take a bunch of used school buses...

LB: Yeah.

EC: ... and--and--and run those up and down those up and down the street. Because... if I go out there, the bus don't have air conditioning on it. Uh, federal government mandate that all of our buses be ADA accessible. Ok. That school bus, they can buy a... a... a used school bus maybe for two or three thousand dollars, maybe. When a... bus... that we purchase... is about four-hundred-and-thirty-thousand dollars each. Ok? Uh... it's a difference! And they don't realize that, you know, their... they just don't--they just don't realize it. They--down in the shop, we're open

twenty-four seven, three-hundred-and sixty-five days a year, there's not even a key to--key to the door down there. It's always somebody there. Federal government mandate that every six thousand miles, we bring a bus in and check it and--check it... front to back. Stem to stern. You know.... uh, we have... so many mandates, so many, uh, rules and stuff that we have to operate by. We just don't put a bus out there and... and a driver behind the wheel and say, alright, you go. There's so much... more to... the operation than what most of our customers see.

LB: It sounds like you get phone calls all the time from the public. What do people talk to you about?

EC: More service. Uh... more service on the routes. You know. Uh... not as much about the cost of the fare or what the fare is as--to more service. I've had when, uh... they thought that, uh, some of the routes were going away--some of the express routes they thought that was going to be eliminated. And they said, hey, we're willing to pay more. You know. We'll pay... four dollars. To--to--to ride. To keep the service out there. You know. We're willing to pay, uh... [laughs] in some cases, almost twice as much as we... were paying. Uh, twice as much as the two-fifty that the fare was to--to keep the service out--out here. You know. But it's not our choice. We have to get permission to--to do it. We don't, uh... we don't set the fare for some of the jurisdictions. They set the fare--what the fare is. Uh... but usually it's more service, uh... 'I wanna go... further than we go.' Why don't we go... to some places like you mentioned, Short Pump, and... uh... why don't we go further down Jefferson Davis Highway. Uh, further out in Mechanicsville or, uh, places like that. Further out, uh, Midlothian. Uh... places like that. Everything is moving out. And like I said, people wanna get to them. You know. Uh... the

mayor... uh... uh... [they ?? funded] what they call the 'grocery store bus.' You know, where people can get to a... a grocery store where they can get good, healthy... food choices. You know, instead of, uh... corner st--not gonna kick the corner store, they serve a purpose, too. But to get good, healthy food choices with vegetables, fruit, fresh vegetables, fresh fruit. Uh... and... you know... things like that they--they can't get to. So, uh, the city fund that... runs twice a month. More to carry people to... Walmart and, you know, places like that where they can get fresh... uh, decent, healthy... food. And stuff like that. So... the city... the city... the city's doing their part. I got to--I got to say that they're--they're doing their part. And if they weren't, I'd say it because, like I said, I'm getting ready to leave. What they gonna do, fire me? You know. Uh... but they--I--I--I think they're doing their part. And I talked to, uh, some of the city leaders and they want to do it. They want to extend service... into some of the places that we don't go. They know the need. They see the need. They wanna do it. But they can't do it alone. You know. Uh... Yeah. They wanna do it. I got meetings today. Uh... on extending some service. I got meeting... today... um, tomorrow, on... regional cooperation. With a... certain locality. Uh... tomorrow. I have a meeting this afternoon on the budget, GRTC budget with the city. Uh, meeting on transfer center... today. With the city--got a whole bunch of meetings today. But the city can't do it alone. You know. Mm mm. I know you talked about the, uh... about, uh... annexation. Did that have anything to do with it. May have. Don't know. You know. That may have upset some folks. Uh... and sometime things like that are... uh... hard to forget. You know. I don't know. But every major city need a good... reliable transportation system. Not just the city, but surround--that would make the counties--that would make it, uh... yeah, so many people--those people that's coming from--from the south and the north and the east... and the west. Outside of... the city limits. Coming into town to work. You know? They're [laughs]--

they're coming into town to work. You know. Uh... So they could very well use... the bus. It's not just city people, uh, uh, using the service, so, I guess the city say, why should we carry the whole load? You know. Why should we carry the whole load? Maybe not in my lifetime, but...

LB: I hope in your lifetime.

EC: I doubt it, but [laughs]... I hope.

LB: Well, it's funny, I mean, it does seem like Richmond is a city that is changing... I mean, we all know that Richmond changes really slowly--

EC: Yes.

LB: ...in some ways. But it seems like... in some ways, it's changing really fast right now. I mean, people, you know the population trend is finally reversed, people are moving back into the city.

EC: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Uh--uh--the city got a lotta good things going for it. You know, uh... the--the Redskins, uh, uh... training camp is coming. Uh... their gonna need transportation for that. You know. Uh, there's a lot of good things, uh, in the city, but the city... the city's in their box, too. They can't go--you--the land... you know, um... [laughs] you can't stretch the land. So they have to do... what they can within the city limits. You know. Uh... yeah. Yeah.



LB: Mr. Coles, is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to talk about?

EC: Um... no, I--I--I--I don't know whether I got... my point across. Or not. Uh... I'm limited to some of the things that I... can say and can't say.

LB: I completely understand [laughs].

EC: [Laughs.] You know. Uh, so those things I probably have to answer for... you know. Uh... I just want people to realize that... that GRTC... uh, is doing all that we can do. You know. We wanna do more. We need to do more. We realize that... more need to be done. Um... but we're doing the best that we can. You know. Uh... we won't give up. I hope... the next person won't give up. Uh, keep talking. Keep spreading the word. Keep trying to show, uh... the need. And the need is--is--is--is--is truly--truly a need. I mean, can you imagine. Uh, that if the buses just absolutely stopped running, what effect that would have not he city, the counties and all? You know. If they just stopped running. Period. We, uh--like I said, uh... the forty-some days, uh, strike. Oh, it made a difference in the city. And people walking, walking, walking. Up and down Broad Street, people walking. Gypsy cabs running around. [Laughs] You know. People picking up people, charging them to take... to, uh, to work or whoever they had to go. Uh.... the outrageous prices they were being charged to--to do that. I... want our customers to realize that... that, uh... uh... again, that.. the city, the state, and the counties... uh... are funding transit. Uh, a local route, uh... customer pay about, uh... it cost--on a regular city route, it cost about four dollars and twenty... three, twenty-four cents. For every person to get on there.

Although they pay a dollar and a half. That have to be made up somewhere. You know. Uh... uh, so that's subsidized, that other three dollars or... is uh--two dollars and something is subsidized by... the state, the city, and the county, that there's--somebody's subsidizing that. They're not paying completely for that ride. An ADA (?) ride, uh, cost about thirty dollars. One way. Ok. Sixty dollars round trip. Out of that sixty, the customer's paying five dollars. That's fifty-five dollars every time, uh, they make a round trip. That's being subsidized. You know. Um... there's some--[laughs]... somebody's paying for it. I hope that they use the service wisely so that it'll stay. You know, uh... there was a politician one time that said, 'I can buy everybody a chauffeured car...' you know [laughs] at the cost of what it cost to... to... to take... take that customer. Um, but it, uh... uh... I just want people to... our customers to really appreciate... the service that's being provided. And that we're not trying to just skimp on service out there. You know. Um... and that, uh... [pauses] that we're doing the best we can.

LB: I think you're getting that across loud and clear.

EC: We're doing the very best that we, uh... that we possibly can. And again, I know that the city... uh... the counties... uh... don't have a endless wealth. Money. I know that, uh, they--school budget was cut back. You know... um... this year, they--we had not received an increase in funding for--for three years. You know, but we--we made it. You know. We had to make some tough choices with some routes. Uh, but we had to do what we had to do. You know. [Laughs] our cost went up, fuel went up, uh... uh, it--[parts?] went up, uh, everything went up. But we were spending three-year-old money. So that the same, you know... uh... I know, uh... I had auditor... we were having a meeting on--on the budget. And the auditor and came and was

getting a cup of coffee and I saw him [out there/after?], I said, 'Mr. [?], come here, I want you to look at this chart, here.' And, uh, he sat down and he looked at it, he said, 'you know... that's amazing.' He said, 'this is the story that need to be told.' He said, 'In the last two years, your cost went up less than 1%.' He said, 'What in that length of time haven't increased...' [laughs] little more than that, loaf of bread. A quart of milk. A bag of chips. Or whatever. You know, so, yes, you're running very lean, very efficient. And I--I tell the board, when you look at our organization chart, our chart... compared to a lot of transit systems... compares ours with theirs and you'll see that we're very lean. We're extremely lean at what we do. But the people here. The directors, the managers here. Uh, when we... cut out one thing... they step in... and take that on. [Laughs] Lotta times, you don't even have to ask. For them to do this. 'Not in my job description,' you never hear that. You know, they take it on, hey, I can do that, or maybe I can merge that into my department. Uh... to keep costs down, to keep us... efficient. As we possibly... can be. You know, uh... they do those things. And I express that to the board of directors all the time, whether they're not--whether or not they hear me or not, but I tell them, hey--it's these people here. These people sitting around the wall here in this room that make this company what it is. They keep costs down. They keep wheels turning. Uh... so that we can pus buses on the street. So that, uh... uh... we're able to pay our... the, uh, hourly employees. And the union realize that, I think the hourly employees realize that. We do all type of incentive stuff, too. Uh, try to help them realize that. We even pay them to come to work. You know, we're gonna pay--you don't miss any time, we're gonna pay you, we're gonna give you... two hundred dollars. You know. As a incentive to... not miss time. Anything to cut down... uh... costs. They say, 'well you gotta pay 'em--you're already paying 'em. Then you're gonna pay 'em on top of paying them.' Say, yeah. If it helps.

LB: Cuz I know that was one of the things that a number of the operators talked about is how they used to have that incentive and then they lost it... and getting it back was a big thing.

EC: Yeah. Uh... uh, we, uh... we--we... we--we changed the program a little bit. Where, uh... now instead of everyone... if you're within--if you haven't missed any time, we pull some names, and you get it. Then we have a grand... drawing at the end of the year where they can get... four or five thousand dollars. You know. And that's, uh, I hope that's an incentive to make them come to work. You know, regardless what you do, there's somebody that's not going to show up. You know. Uh... regardless what you do. I always tell them, 'if you do forty-nine, I do fifty-one.' But you damn sure better your forty-nine. Ok? You got to do forty-nine, I'll do fifty-one. And most of them do. Most of them do fifty-five. You know, you can call them... hey, we don't have an operator, can you run an extra trip or something. It's rare that you hear no. You know. Uh, they said, well, ok... maybe not because you're paying, and you're paying them time-and-a-half when they do that. But... I--I--I think some of them--I--I--it's not just the money part. But I think some of them just... like the job and wanna help, be helpful.

LB: They seem to really love the job.

EC: Yeah. I'm glad they do. I'm glad they do. Like I said, it's the best job here. You know, a bus operator is the best job here. You get to meet all kinda people, like I said, I met my wife. You know.

LB: And you are the third person I've interviewed who's said that--

EC: They've met their wife?

LB: Out of seven interviews.

EC: Maybe--maybe--maybe--maybe she--after forty-two years, maybe she wished she hadn't have caught that bus, but [laughs]...

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: But I met--I met her on the bus as well. Mm hmm. Yeah. I don't know whether you can make any sense out of my rambling on, but, uh...

LB: Oh, my goodness, it's... incredible interview, thank you so much.

EC: I don't know about that, but, uh...

LB: No, it's true. It's true. And you know, we're--we're just hoping that this project will... get it out there. Richmond magazine is gonna do an article about it. So... you know, they--they may be contacting operators here for quotes as well. And, you know, we're just--we're just hoping that it'll start a conversation.

EC: I guess they tell you that, uh... uh, we've been here, what, three, four years? Something like that. Um... it's over on Robinson Street for well over a hundred years. You know, was the first, uh, Richmond was the first, uh, city for electric streetcars. Uh... [vepco?] Which is now Dominion Power, uh... Richmond Trolley, they started the first transpiration system. Here int he city. And then it was sold to... VTC, Virginia Transit Company, and was a private... thing... a Ill of that I'm sure you heard. Yeah. It's amazing story here.

LB: It is. It's a really amazing story. More people need to know about it.

EC: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Alright. You got me sort of melancholy--melancholy here. Talking about--because my time is getting short. Here. I'm gonna miss this place. You do something of forty-seven years... uh... over half of my life. You know, cuz I'm not ninety-four yet--

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: ... not ninety-four yet. Well over half of my life, you know, that I've been.... uh, coming into Davis Avenue and to here. You know. And I tell them that now it's time for me to put up my garage sign and bring my bus to the garage for the last time. My last trip. You know. But, uh, I'll be a old man sitting on the porch, rocking chair, slobbering, and [?]-

LB: [Laughs.]

EC: ...and every now and then, I'll stop and I'll think about, reflect back on it, good old days at

GRTC. Ya'll take care.

LB: You too.

EC: See that--hearing bones cracking and stuff--

Benjamin: It's been a real pleasure--

EC: It's telling me something!

Benjamin: ...interview.

EC: It's telling me, time to stop [laughs]!

LB: [Laughs] thank you so much.

EC: Ok, I'm--I hope you got something you can use, I hope. Ya'll take care.

LB: You, too. Buh-bye.

