

End of the road

Mukwonago man retires from 52-year long career in transit

By Bridget Dean

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WAUKESHA — Don Jans first passed a bus driver test nearly 52 years ago. He was given a school bus route and hit the road. He has remained in the transit industry since and will be retiring on Feb. 9 after an impressive career.

“I always said I did every aspect of the business except turn a wrench,” Jans joked. “I’ve never been mechanically inclined.”

His career took him from driving the buses to training new drivers, overseeing safety operations at a state level and working with professionals across the country.

His career began in June of 1972. While Jans was working on his master’s degree in criminology and sociology, he got his first job in the industry as a driver at Wisconsin Coachlines and Dairyland Buses.

“I grew up on a farm, and I’ve driven trucks, and I’ve driven tractors ... I took the school bus out. (The hiring manager) said ‘oh you’re fine,’” Jans said. One driving test later, Jans was hired and started working. He said bus drivers now have up to six weeks of training before they hit the road alone.

“I wanted to be a professor. But, once I started in the transportation field, working with everyone and traveling, I decided to change; I enjoyed it,” said Jans. “It was not uncommon at all to see teachers that had switched over and were working for different companies ... I thought, well, I’m just one of the numbers.”

He drove routes from Waukesha and Kenosha to Milwaukee and drove for charters and tours. He was a driver for seven years, all the while working his way up to supervisor and eventually president of the company.

“I drove all over the United States,” Jans said. “It was a fantastic way to see the country.”

From driver to trainer

From there, Jans became a bus driver trainer.

“I started training and all of the sudden I wasn’t doing much driving. I was spending full time training people,” he said. “I think the relationship was (that) I wanted to be a teacher, so it was coming across very easily.”

In 1989, he left Wisconsin Coach Lines to become the general manager of Waukesha Metro Transit until 2007.

That year, the Metro’s liability insurance carrier, Transit Mutual, created a full-time safety director role and sought Jans to fill it. At the same time, he became region manager for the Waukesha Metro’s management company, Professional Transit Management, and spent much time driving across Wisconsin to work with transit system teams.

“I did a lot of work with the American Public Transit Association and some of their safety committees. The nice thing was, I met a lot of very talented people across the country, and probably the most rewarding was when people come back and say I helped them in their career to advance,” Jans said.

Back to Waukesha Metro

In 2013, he returned to work for Waukesha Metro Transit. He never wanted to leave his home in Waukesha

County, not even for a promotion.

“I wanted to come back and spend another 10 years. I was looking forward to that. I enjoyed the time I was the safety director, but there again I spent a lot of time on the road,” Jans said. “I’m tired of driving.”

He’s now the Waukesha Metro Transit compliance specialist. Jans handles driver payroll, compliance issues, labor negotiations and statistical reporting. He has also been training other employees for his role. Because Waukesha Metro receives federal grants, the organization receives a review every three years.

“We’re very proud of the fact that the last two tri-annual reviews we had were zero findings. That’s highly unusual. We’re in the process of preparing for the 2024 tri-annual review. I expect it’s going to be very similar,” Jans said. “The people that drive the buses have a really hard job, and I don’t think people realize.”

Jans’s goal was to work 50 years in the transit industry, although his coworkers at Waukesha Metro Transit convinced him to work one more year into 2024. He’s looking forward to spending time around his home and yard in Mukwonago, where his family lives with many animals.

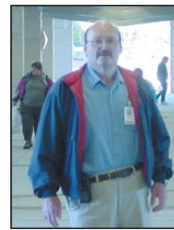
“When I grew up, I always worked a couple of jobs at a time,” he said. “I guess I’m kind of a workaholic.” By choice, he said he spends 45-50 hours in the office a week.

“I enjoyed working with the people. That will be the biggest adjustment for me, is not seeing everybody on a daily basis and missing that interaction ... I kind of look at them as family,” he said. “I’m lucky enough that I’ve liked what I’ve done.”



Waukesha Metro team members with one of the Metro buses. Left to right, standing, Jason Zachow, Kari Bloedow, Brian Engelking, Linda Strike, Arnie Boivin, Don Jans. Kneeling left to right, Jon Hine and Mark Gurski.

Courtesy of Waukesha Metro Transit



Don Jans at the Transit Center opening on Oct. 2, 2004 when he was the Waukesha Metro Transit general manager.

Courtesy of Waukesha Metro Transit