



Coordination Case Study

NATIONAL AGING AND DISABILITY TRANSPORTATION CENTER

Virginia Rural Microtransit Project

Background

Ken Pollock is the Director of Bay Transit, which is the public transportation division of Bay Aging, the area agency on aging for the 12 counties in eastern Virginia. Bay Transit provides public transportation including fixed route, demand-response, and a New Freedom program in this region. The New Freedom program provides contracted transportation outside of the Bay Transit service area for seniors and people with disabilities using local non-emergency medical transportation providers. Bay Transit primarily uses Section 5311 funding for their public fixed route and demand-response transportation services. They also have an agreement with Bay Aging to provide transportation to their eight senior centers and for meal delivery with Older Americans Act funding. Prior to the pandemic, Bay Transit was providing over 150,000 rides per year. During the pandemic, their ridership dropped to around 110,000 rides. One reason they did not see as drastic a drop in ridership as many systems was that they have always and continue to provide employment transportation for workers deemed essential during the pandemic.



Description of the Pilot Program

In 2021, Bay Transit began a project to operate a Rural Microtransit Program in Gloucester County along the Chesapeake Bay. The pilot is designed to determine if this type of demand-response service can be successful, cost-effective, and replicable in other rural parts of the state. The project was initiated by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) who applied for and received an [Integrated Mobility Innovations](#) (IMI) grant from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). IMI grants focus on creating new transportation solutions that are integrated with existing public transit services, then examining the impact on the agency and the rider's experience. DRPT's project proposal was to provide microtransit in rural communities in the Tidewater region. The project was to augment existing transit resources by leveraging mobile technology for real-time trip booking and vehicle routing, providing real-time, demand-response microtransit service. DRPT reached out to Bay Transit and another rural transit agency, Mountain Empire Older Citizens (MEOC), located in the mountainous region in the southwest corner of Virginia, to implement these pilot projects. These agencies were chosen prior to writing the grant and each were picked because of their unique challenges and the relationships DRPT already had with these programs. The area Bay Transit serves includes a river crossed by only two bridges while MEOC's challenge is the mountainous roads in their area, both impacting time of travel. Via Transportation was chosen to be the software provider for the project. Via helped both systems develop an app addressing their specific needs.

The microtransit project is to utilize a smart phone ride-hailing app to give the riders a more convenient experience. This case study will focus on the Bay Transit project which had a different focus than MEOC's project with the university. Bay Transit worked with DRPT and Via to develop a 10-square mile service area for this microtransit project that includes a Walmart, hospital, grocery store, and shops as well as a senior apartment complex in Gloucester County, VA. The microtransit service operates within this area which is geo-fenced so a ride can only be scheduled from within the border. The fare for the ride is \$2. There is also a fixed-route service in the area that runs every 45 minutes as well as the demand response service which requires a 24-hour advance call. If the microtransit service is successful, it is anticipated these other services will be discontinued in the areas served by microtransit.

Funding for the project came from an Integrated Mobility Innovations grant that DRPT applied for totaling \$160,930. With additional state funding beyond the match requirement, Bay Transit received \$107,450 for this project. The funding is being used to cover the capital purchase of the app development and the operating expenses of the project. Bay Transit is using an existing vehicle and staff at this point but anticipate purchasing a new vehicle that will be used for this service.

This project started in January of 2021 and the first step was procuring a software provider. February through June 2021 was spent developing the app and receiving training on how to use it. Transit services began on June 28, 2021, and will continue through September 2022.

While the project is centered around public transportation in general, there is an effort to encourage older adults and individuals with disabilities to use the service by including a senior apartment complex, work center and adult group home for people with disabilities within the designated border. Marketing of the new program was targeted to these populations as well. For people who do not have the ability or desire to access technology, there is a call-in option to schedule rides. At this point, approximately 40% of users are calling in rather than using the app. COVID restrictions prevented a more thorough training and outreach effort for transit users about the app, but plans are in place to increase training for older adults to raise their comfort level in downloading and using the app.

Coordination and Partnerships

This rural microtransit project was initiated by the Department of Rail and Public Transportation in an effort to improve transportation in rural areas in the state. When this FTA funding opportunity became available, DRPT knew that Bay Transit and Mountain Empire Older Citizens would both be interested in partnering with them and reached out to collaborate prior to writing the grant. Both transit agencies wrote letters of support for DRPT's grant application. The relationship these agencies had established with DRPT prior to the grant application is a critical reason they were invited to participate in this project.

At the beginning, DRPT, Bay Transit, and MEOC worked together to select a software provider. Once that procurement was completed and Via was chosen, MEOC no longer collaborates as closely with Bay Transit because they each have different issues to address and each developed their own app., They continue to meet quarterly to exchange updates and discuss similar issues and solutions.

Coordination meetings continue to occur weekly on Zoom with Bay Transit, Via, DRPT, and a representative from Gloucester County. Early in the project, Bay Transit invited someone from the county to get involved in the project so they could be kept up to date on how things are going and be part of the collaboration. Bay Transit approached a county representative who was known to have an interest in and supportive of transit programs. The coordination meetings focus on problems that are occurring, ways to get more people to download and use the app and reviewing ridership numbers and data. The involvement of the county representative is very important as the county may become a key part of the sustainability plan after grant funding runs out.

While there is no advisory committee assigned specifically to the microtransit pilot project, Bay Aging has an advisory council for all aging programs including transit and has been informed about the project and is kept up to date in their quarterly meetings.

Project Status

As of Nov. 2021, this pilot project is in its fifth month of providing services and the data is just starting to be analyzed. Microtransit services will continue to be provided through September of 2022. The last three months of 2022 will be spent analyzing data and writing the final grant report; outlining the successes and failures of the project. Meetings with DRPT, Via and the county representative will continue weekly as they troubleshoot problems and make changes to address issues that arise. A priority for the project is coming up with ways to increase the number of people who download and use the app rather than calling in to schedule rides.

Outcomes

People who are using the service have a wait time of about eight minutes. Incentives are in place to encourage people to use the app such as giving free rides when downloading the app, referring people to get the app, or posting pictures on Facebook while using the service. As of the end of November 2021, 1,339 one-way rides have been completed and 256 accounts have been created in the app.

While the project is not solely for older adults and people with disabilities, there has been an effort to directly market the project to these groups partly because the community has a rapidly growing population of older adults. With the app data, Bay Transit will be able to track the number of rides to and from particularly destinations including the senior apartment complex or work center to determine who is using the service.

Once the data is gathered and analyzed, Bay Transit will start to establish the specific costs of this program to determine if it is more or less cost effective than other transit services they currently offer in that area

Lessons Learned

Mr. Pollock pointed out that one thing they would have done differently is to get more citizen feedback regarding the project in order to gain more support and adoption early on. There are challenges to getting this input, but it would have been valuable, and he anticipates working this into the process in the future. A positive lesson learned is the importance of involving local government officials in the project from the very beginning. When the service started, they had a ribbon cutting with news coverage and gave the first rides to county representatives. The goal is for the county to recognize the value of this microtransit service and become a partner when the grant funds are gone.



Next Steps

Looking ahead, Bay Transit is planning to apply for a demonstration project grant from the state for an additional 12-15 months of operating funds to continue this microtransit service. This funding will give them more time to collect and analyze data to show the success of the project for future funding requests.

Bay Transit's rural microtransit project is a great example of how maintaining partnerships can lead to an opportunity to develop new programs. Through ongoing meetings with these partners, challenges are addressed, and adjustments are made to continue to improve and grow the program. The viability and reliability of the new microtransit system will be demonstrated as data is collected and analyzed over the upcoming months and reported in the final IMI grant report.



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NADTC's mission is to increase accessible transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers nationwide.

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