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PASSENGER Transport

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The Rapid, Via Partner To Provide On-Demand Paratransit Service

THE RAPID IN GRAND RAPIDS, MI, is partnering with Via to implement an updated model for paratransit deployment: “Rapid On Demand,” an app-based network that incorporates ride-hailing technology rather than pre-scheduling days in advance.

The six-month pilot project will provide same-day rides with a wait time of 15 minutes or less to riders eligible for The Rapid’s GO!Bus paratransit service within a specific service area. While Via provides wheelchair-accessible vehicles in almost all its markets, this will be its first-ever deployment fully dedicated to paratransit.

Andrew Johnson, chief executive office of The Rapid, called the new service “an exciting opportunity to provide same-day service that improves independence and customer experience to those who may not be able to utilize typical ride-hailing solutions.”

Funding for the pilot program, totaling \$373,782, comes from the Michigan Mobility Challenge, funded through an \$8 million state legislative appropriation in 2018 to use technology and innovation to address core mobility gaps for seniors, persons with disabilities and veterans across the state. The city of Grand Rapids and the county’s disability advocacy agency are joining Via on the project team.

By using the Rapid On Demand app, riders can hail a shuttle directly from their smartphone. Its technology provides for multiple riders to seamlessly share the vehicle and can direct passengers to a nearby virtual bus stop within a short walking distance for pickup and drop-off.

The Delicate Balance Of Microtransit

Service vs. Efficiency, or Transformational Opportunity vs. Just the Latest Fad?

BY KATHERINE LEWIS

WITH MANY PUBLIC TRANSIT AGENCIES seeing declining ridership in recent years, and technology advances facilitating scheduling of small-capacity vehicles, many systems are looking to microtransit to improve customer service and expand their service area. This feeds into changing customer expectations—thanks to disruptive technology across a range of industries—for everything at our fingertips, from food through DoorDash to movies on Netflix and rides via Uber and Lyft.

Microtransit holds the potential of bringing new riders to fixed routes, reaching suburban areas seeing the quickest population growth and increasing equity by providing access to groups with the most need: older riders, low-income residents and people with disabilities. Using mini-buses or large vans in a fixed area would allow public transit agencies to penetrate more deeply into neighborhoods without inconveniencing residents in the way full-size buses would. Meanwhile, the cost of these smaller, more nimble vehicles makes the service more affordable to provide and the convenience of on-demand scheduling makes it more appealing to riders than existing paratransit.

But in exploring microtransit, public transit professionals should be aware of the many factors they will need to balance. As you expand the ser-

vice area, you risk increasing wait times. The more closely you try to meet customers’ expectations of a personalized experience, the more your costs will rise. Basically, an agency is seeking to locate a sweet spot between a taxi service and traditional public transit. The key is to find that happy medium based on the unique characteristics of the system, customer base and local needs.

“Are you going to be fast and frequent or are you going to give a little piece to everybody and have lower service?” asked Jameson Auten, senior vice president of operations and innovation for the Kansas City Area (MO) Transportation Authority (KCATA). “In the places where we need coverage, how do on-demand services fill those gaps?”

To maximize your agency’s opportunity for success, be sure to plan carefully, communicate with your customers, launch the service aggressively enough to be noticed, expect to adapt and never take your eye from the prize, driving efficiency as microtransit gets underway, according to interviews with public transit officials across the country.

A Thoughtful Planning Process

First, assess where your riders are and where they want to go.

“The first question should always be, ‘What

MICROTRANSIT CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

Let’s Play Ball!



Photo by Angel Grajeda, CTA

Chicago Transit Authority President Dorval R. Carter Jr. threw out the first pitch before the start of the Aug. 7 Chicago Cubs baseball game against the Oakland Athletics. This Transit Appreciation Game was held at Wrigley Field in support of regional public transit.



Photo by Jeffrey Leaser, JTA

APTA Chair David M. Stackrow Sr., board treasurer of the Capital District Transportation Authority, threw out the first pitch at the July 22 Jacksonville Jumbo Shrimp Minor League game at an event hosted by the Jacksonville Transportation Authority held during APTA’s Transit Board Members & Board Administrators Seminar.



Public transit agencies across the country are exploring new technologies to improve all areas of operations, including the digitization of data and real-time asset monitoring. Here is how LA Metro streamlined its diagnostic capabilities.

LA Metro: Full Speed Ahead

An Interview with Bob Spadafora

Senior Executive Officer, Rail Fleet Services
Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro)

BY MAUREEN H. CRONIN

LOS ANGELES METRO HAS A SIMPLE

goal: to lead the way for significantly higher levels of production throughout all areas of its business while maintaining a constant state of good repair on its fleets. An overall goal is to virtually eliminate paperwork and paper storage.

“The future is digital. We already bring our phones and tablets everywhere; it’s time to use those devices for business,” said Bob Spadafora, senior executive officer, rail fleet services, for LA Metro. “It’s just the way to go.”

Other transportation-related industries, such as airlines, are ahead of public transit in using digital technology and equipment for maintenance. “When you’re 30,000 feet in the air, you can’t have a mistake,” Spadafora said. Digitizing data helps eliminate misunderstandings, he added, and using digital and electronic methods of communication increases efficiencies.

Vehicle maintenance professionals have embraced vehicle or asset monitoring—also in real-time—which makes their jobs that much easier. This allows employees to flag any issue with the vehicle and send it to the maintenance yard as quickly as sending an email. The maintenance yard now has a list to check

when the vehicle comes back. This practice leads to keeping an agency’s records in good order.

It’s for these reasons and more that Spadafora started looking for something that could provide the diagnostic and electronic capabilities he needed for LA Metro.

“I’m always looking for cutting-edge technology,” he said. “I knew we needed something simple, fairly seamless and adaptable—not only for operations but for my workers, the men and women who have to enter data and create reports.”

Spadafora added that maintenance workers, especially, have a great deal of paper items to drag around—bulky user manuals, instructions, schematics—so having it all available electronically would be a total game changer.

“It’s not just the sheer number of manuals and such,” he said. “We’re also dealing with language.” Writing in all the information for the day’s reports is time-consuming and the notes ultimately have to be re-entered into the back-end maintenance system. “The amount of paperwork we produce and the paper storage requirements are massive,” Spadafora said. Most public transit agencies will agree with this.

“Metro had been looking at ways to meet future demands for scalability, higher levels of efficiencies and increased production for awhile,” he continued. “That’s where **iMarq from Connixt** came in.”

iMarq integrated with LA Metro’s back-end systems and digitized agency forms so that workers could recognize them easily.

LA Metro and Connixt worked side by side in the implementation. “They listened to what we needed and were able to configure everything accordingly,” Spadafora said. “We were integrated with our back-end system within two months—and we didn’t lose any

time or functionality during it.”

The agency workshop techs, supervisors and managers simply had to download the app to their mobile device or tablet and open it. All the same forms were there, along with the workflows for supervisor approvals and signoffs.

Bringing the workers on board would prove more challenging. “People don’t like change,” Spadafora said. However, he added, eventually everyone saw that the new technology would make their jobs easier and they could be more productive.

Employees have seen a drastic reduction in paperwork since, and Spadafora said it will soon be eliminated altogether. “Every manual or schematic we have can now be viewed electronically via the tablet, which has made a huge difference in productivity and accountability,” he explained.

Spadafora said he used to see 100 daily inspections from a division and had to manage and file 100 pieces of paper. That issue doesn’t exist anymore. And, he added, information and data are being typed in rather than handwritten, so the process is much faster and much more reliable.

For example, any new information about a part or a change in instructions can be uploaded quickly into the tablet, so workers have the most updated information in minutes rather than days. The added bonus is that, with the huge reduction in paper consumption, the agency reduced its eco-footprint and can now run greener.

With the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles, Metro is working on a few projects: 28 to be exact. The agency

calls it “Twenty-Eight by ’28,” referring to 28 projects in the pipeline scheduled to be completed by 2028. Among these projects is developing the West Santa Ana light rail branch to connect downtown Los Angeles with cities in southeastern Los Angeles.

LA Metro is also working on procurements for new railcars to replace old ones, railcar overhaul procurements and expanding light rail lines with extensions to Los Angeles International Airport from Redondo Beach.

“I think it’s important to move forward with technology, especially since the new workforce is already acclimated to their cellphones and tablets and will, to some degree, be expected to work with them,” Spadafora noted.

“We did go step by step with the maintenance staff on the floor,” he said, “and while there was some pushback, there was not as much as I expected. We listened to their concerns about dropping the tablets, so we got them heavy-duty protection. Their feedback helped us fine tune what the tablets needed even more.”

Spadafora said respecting the workers’ concerns and requests was the key to success. Everyone saw the new process was a better way to work, process inspections and work orders, and to stay productive, he said.

Maureen H. Cronin is a freelance writer for Connixt.



Have you introduced new technology or practices to improve your operations? *Passenger Transport* wants to share your story; contact Senior Managing Editor David A. Riddy at driddy@apta.com.