

Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit, Inc.

Meeting of the Board of Directors

October 27, 2022 | 4:00pm via Zoom

Attendees

Board Members: Bridgette Brady; Lisa Holmes; Dan Klein; Laura Lewis; Ducson Nguyen; Frank Proto; Denise Thompson

TCAT Staff: Susan Brock; Scot Vanderpool; Erik Amos; Julie Ellis- Grove; Taylor Hessler; Phil Smith; Mike Smith; Colleen Marsh; Nate Wells; Dameon Allen; Curt Parish

Public Attendees: Jimmy Jordan; Sabrina Leddy; Eric Nord

Call to Order

Chair L. Lewis called the meeting to order at 4:02 pm.

Board Member Items

No Board member items

Public Comment

Sabrina Leddy introduced herself as the chair of the FreeCAT campaign, for fare free and expanded TCAT. She said they are motivated by 2 aims; to reduce the county's greenhouse gas emissions by promoting public transit over private vehicles; and to improve quality of life for historically underserved communities by removing barriers to mobility. She said their model, rather than place a burden on the people of Tompkins County by funding through local taxation, believes Cornell should pay an increased share of TCAT's budget to make FreeCAT feasible. She argued that the university is more than capable by being the wealthiest entity in the county, and also believes that Cornell could not survive without this community. She said they should do more to give back to the people on which they depend. "Most everyone here is aware that fare elimination and service expansion are probably not possible without Cornell's contribution." She came with two messages. First, she expressed appreciation for the fare free planning initiative, all the data seen by the Planning Committee have been super exciting and she looks forward to hearing conclusions when ready. Second point, since the results could and hopefully will result in a shift towards a fare free model, she thinks any major investment in the current fare based system would be unwise - this includes the potentially multi-million dollar revamp of the farebox system, and although she is aware that the fareboxes are in bad shape, to make such a large investment now while the fare free initiative is underway, she believes undermines the power of the initiative. She infers from the resolution, the Board recognizes the value of fare elimination which would be: increased ridership, increased transit accessibility, decreased traffic, decreased emissions, and decreased administrative hassle.

Eric Nord said he has also been working with the FreeCAT campaign. This would be the first Board meeting attended. He has the impression that the Board has contradictory purposes; the

first is to represent public interest through the city and county but he believes there is a secondary purpose that is to insulate Cornell from public pressure, for example to support the FreeCAT campaign. He said it sounds like the Board is struggling to even enforce some existing agreements that it has with Cornell. He is aware of losses that were controversial. He wonders why it is difficult for the Board to be more aggressive in its dealings with Cornell. He said he recognizes the asymmetry there. As a grassroots supporter of FreeCAT this is frustrating to him, because they are told this isn't a good time to ask about FreeCAT and how there's all these financial difficulties and the labor shortages, etc. He said the bus system is 75% Cornell riders and it's clear, the Board has made it clear as far as he understands, that there is a lot of enthusiasm for "FreeCAT", not just within TCAT but of course within the community. "I've yet to meet anyone that has said they're against the goals of FreeCAT, to go fare free and expand service." "As [the campaign] spoke with hundreds and hundreds of residents, it's clear the question is "how does this get paid for"? He said they also know that Cornell has the ability to pay for this, if the will and public pressure is there...so he offered the option of providing the public support necessary to make it a stronger case. He believes that the FreeCAT campaign shows the public is ready for this and is willing to stand up and speak its mind and hopes that the Board will do the same and be more forward and aggressive with its dealings with Cornell.

L. Lewis thanks him.

L. Lewis makes it known that she is one of the City representatives on the Board. She said the statement Sabrina made that "fare free is underway", is not completely accurate. While there is keen interest in looking at it as a possibility, the Planning Committee is doing a study. She also took issue with the statement that "the Board appears to insulate Cornell from public pressure, and that the Board struggles to assert itself." She emphasized that the Board members express themselves freely during Board meetings as well as at committee meetings. She explained it is largely the cost of going fare-free that has prohibited TCAT from moving towards this, along with capacity issues that are very real, not incidental or minor. The availability of buses, drivers, and mechanics, the supply chain, are all relevant factors.

S. Brock corrects, that while the local underwriters make recommendations to the TCAT Board as to who the directors should be, it's the Board itself that elects the directors and once elected, the directors do not represent any of the underwriters; they only represent TCAT and TCAT's best interests. If there is any misperception that any one member is representing a particular entity whose interests may or may not coincide with TCAT's, it is not true. They represent TCAT and act in TCAT's best interest. She also addressed the allusion made to the Board struggling with Cornell over recent agreements and clarified that the press has not reported the facts correctly. TCAT recently entered into a new Transportation Agreement, because the old one was expiring, and that was among TCAT, the City of Ithaca, Cornell, and Tompkins County. There was some effort proposed by the City, that Cornell then supported, to limit some of the underwriters' liability for TCAT losses. Then as TCAT had further discussions, Cornell was fine with TCAT's proposal, the City held its stance longer and additional adjustments were made to assuage some of the City's concerns over that issue. Ultimately, the issue came from the City initially, Cornell did then support it, but then dropped its support in some regards; then there were further negotiations to make the City comfortable with the

agreement. To the extent that there's a perception that it was Cornell pushing this Board around, that's absolutely not true.

L. Lewis corroborates this account and thanks S. Brock for her comments. L. Lewis said that each of the underwriters had healthy and lively discussions in the process of negotiating the new Transportation Agreement. There was mutual respect and more than a willingness for all 3 underwriters to work together and to work together with TCAT. She said a very good agreement came out of it.

Approval of minutes

The Board approved both the minutes from the Special Board meeting/Public Hearing on August 15, 2022 and Special Board Meeting on August 17, 2022 (motion by D. Thompson, second by L. Homes, 6-0-0 vote [vote was held before F. Proto arrived.]).

Chair's Report

L. Lewis' chair report was brief. She said October is a very busy month for the City and County; it is budget time, everyone has multiple meetings a week. There's a lot going on in TCAT and a lot going on in the work of all our underwriters. She noted thanks to TCAT staff who have showed up at a range of events such as Streets Alive. A driver was there demonstrating how to use the front bike racks. She heard from many residents how much they appreciated that.

GM Report

Systems report: September ridership by route ended at just over 260,000 riders. A drop of 27% from last year at this time. By Route categories are reflective of service reductions. TCAT has tried to not reduce any of the rural routes because they already operate infrequently.

Gadabout has remained steady but is now also facing a driver shortage and they are having to prioritize trips and cut some non-medical requests such as for shopping. S. Vanderpool recently returned from the NYPTA conference and noted that other agencies are operating somewhere around 50-65% of what they were in 2019, similar to TCAT's 62% for the year so far.

L. Lewis asked about the reduction of service; if that has had an impact and is it reflected in the chart? S. Vanderpool said the current service reductions don't show specific change in the chart, but the current YTD is a difference of almost 100,000 riders between 2022 and 2019. This is a reflection of all the service reductions in the past few years, with fewer buses on the road, pick up fewer passengers. Diesel buses used 27,000 gallons in September and averaged 4.1 mpg while the electric buses ran at 19.1MPGe. Preventative maintenance is at 61.5% and Brake inspections are at 96%. Road calls are taking a slight spike, with August's 24 and September's 27 road calls. Missed trips are also spiking due to driver and bus shortage, with 411 missed one-way trips during September. F. Proto circles back to road calls, asking if there are any patterns in bus type contributing to the uptick in road calls. It was not known at the time. Cost of fuel averaged \$3.89 per gallon; \$116,000 for the month. YTD diesel fuel has cost TCAT just over \$1M. Collisions and Incidents, there were 4 in September, 29 overall for 2022 compared to 35 in 2021. TCAT currently has 61 full time operators, 9 mechanics, 9 part-time operators. Retention rate is at 88% for the quarter. Other HR activities include: recruiting, attending job fairs, training new employees, assessing the current employment and retention situation. Along with filling administrative support positions. Currently involved in open enrollment and renewal.

Marketing and Communication dept: P. Poist and J. Jennings participated in Bearwalk Tompkins, Streets Alive, press releases for the FreeRyde program. IT has a list of current and future projects, most notable: updates in facility security and the server room redesign.

Action Items

There were no Action Items.

Discussion Items

There were no additional Board member discussion items.

Committee Reports

- **Executive Committee** – S. Vanderpool elaborated on some of the topics that were discussed. The Committee met Oct 19, and discussed Farebox updates; the RFP is out and has a response deadline of Nov. 15. We are looking for something less cumbersome; less hardware for easier maintenance. Currently TCAT is losing significant revenue due to the majority of current fareboxes not operating efficiently or at all. This is causing frustration for both customers and operators. This [RFP/replacement] is a short-term solution, so that fare-free can be an option down the road.

L. Lewis asked if they discussed any topics, like are other agencies having trouble with their Fareboxes, or about fare-free at NYPTA? S. Vanderpool replied that they weren't discussing things like that. Networking was emphasized but there were vendors that were advertising their fareboxes and products.

Triennial update. There were 29 findings throughout when the final report was finally received and all the findings were for the county, not TCAT. The county and TCAT will connect with the director of transportation and traffic safety from Huntington, Long Island who will provide some assistance to Tompkins County to develop written procedures and guidance. Huntington did not have any findings in their triennial and should be able to help us prepare for the next one.

TCAT had a film crew from the PBS series NOVA visit October 3, and filmed an interview about the TCAT Electric bus operation. S. Vanderpool was interviewed and discussed the importance of electrification in transit. The episode is expected to air sometime in February or March of 2023.

The committee also talked about service cuts based on shortage of buses, implementing reduction of service on a temporary basis. Two factors working against TCAT - bus shortage and driver shortage. M-F service is being reduced on a week-by-week basis. Each Friday we are assessing the shape we are in for the next week. Communication is essential. He commends the two customer service reps, S. Westfall and G. Vazquez, for working diligently and being the voice between TCAT and the public; keeping service announcements up to date and fielding the calls and complaints.

Underwriter presentation, the budget request has gone to each of the underwriters. L. Lewis speaks on the City side of things...the City will not approve its budget until Nov. 2, but there were no questions or concerns raised about the TCAT budget.

- **Audit Committee** – The Audit Committee did not meet. They have received drafts of the audit though and are preparing for a meeting in November. They will aim for the December meeting to approve the audit. There were no red flags discovered. F. Proto commended J. Ellis-Grove on her tremendous work, and working with Insero. There was one new regulation they will have to adjust to, but the Audit has so far been going smoothly.
- **Budget Committee** – The Budget Committee met October 19, they went over September numbers. They focused on the changes from month to month. The projection for the end of the year went to \$2.7 million, up from last month's \$2.6 million. J. Ellis-Grove explained where the money was "picked up" was from driver and mechanic shortages; from unfilled positions. Passenger revenue is down \$256,000 from what was projected for the budget and may end up around \$300,000 under by the end of the year. The lost farebox revenue is due to fareboxes malfunctioning or simply not working altogether. Fuel is over-budget as well, because the price inflation rose so drastically. We are currently over by \$295,000. A huge jump in what was projected for fuel expenses.

F. Proto asked if the expenses reflect strictly diesel fuel, J. Ellis-Grove confirms this. He suggested to clarify that on the charts. J. Ellis-Grove explained our electric utilities are carried under "general expenses". The cost of the electricity solely for the electric buses is hard to calculate because the meters are read only quarterly, subsequently making it harder to calculate our Kw/hr versus diesel usage.

F. Proto said he knows we are approaching year end, but it would be helpful to be able to reflect the cost difference between the electric buses and diesel buses and that we really need a fair comparison. Hopefully in the next year we can isolate the charging buses and get a 1:1 cost of electric vs. diesel.

J. Ellis-Grove said they are working with maintenance too to figure out which buses are out of service, how long/often they are out of service, etc. and that will help us see the cost of the charge. We are trying to get a handle on the entire fleet, to see what buses are out on the road and what buses are costing us the most.

L. Lewis also thinks it's important to move in the direction of having the comparison of electric and diesel buses. She asked for a refresher on the anticipated date of the arrival of the next fleet of electric buses. S. Vanderpool responded that TCAT will be getting 6 40ft buses and 4 smaller electric vans, either late 2023 or early 2024. The date is not exact because of the continued supply chain issues, so multiple agencies may be in line to get buses thanks to incoming grant money, but that doesn't stop the fact that a certain delivery date for the bus delivery is not possible at this time. He talked about the goal of electrification and the cost of electrification, like F. Proto mentions. He reminded the Board again, that TCAT is working with New York Power Authority (NYPA) who is able to assess our electric bills and try to help us reduce expenses. We also acquired a software program that focuses on the "on-demand" or peak hours and creates a

program that limits our use of "on-demand" charging which will hopefully help reduce our costs as well.

- **Human Resource Committee** – The Human Resource Committee met on October 20 and discussed training and recruitment. C. Marsh gives the report, in the absence of J. Dotson. As mentioned, they focused on recruitment and retention, and a current class of operators. TCAT did a couple of pilot classes held at the Green Street Station. Thanks to several individuals, for 2023, they have the idea to utilize Green street to have a bit more room to expand on some of our trainings. D. Nguyen asked how many drivers started in the class of October, C. Marsh replied that there are 3 in the class; 1 is fully licensed and 2 are training to acquire their CDL licenses.
- **Planning Committee** – The TCAT Planning Committee met on October 13, D. Klein read some of his notes from the last meeting. Intern Chloe Long presented her research from 5 cases studies of communities around the country that have gone fare-free over the past 20yrs; Most notably Ulster County in New York which went Fare-free last month. A community member Susan Beckley also did some follow up research on them. He said Erik Amos, who just joined from another meeting, gave a lot of information. Work he has done both conceptually and also financially about what going fare free might need. The numbers he is generating are very preliminary and have a lot of assumptions built in to them, that they don't know if they are necessarily true. This is not the final work by any stretch. It looks like it would cost about \$1.5 million for us to go fare-free. That would be extra revenue that would need to be made up somewhere. One assumption in there, is that Cornell would continue their MOU payments at the same rate they are now. That's an open question, and we really don't have that information. One reason why the \$1.5 million figure is not to be relied on at this time. He is saying, and no one has disagreed so far, that they are coming to the end of all the work they can do on this. They are going to meet in November and he intends to compile all the information in one place and add a bit more narrative, and that will be the report the committee issues. That way all the information is compiled and ready to go, if such a time comes when TCAT is ready to pursue fare-free. At the beginning of the process S. Vanderpool laid out parameters and goalposts that TCAT would have to reach to go fare free, many have been talked about; we need more operators, more mechanics, our preventative maintenance rates need to be higher, before we can even consider actually implementing going fare free. We are far from the numbers now. He added that a member of the public early in the meeting on stated "the public is ready" to go fare free, and that may be true, but TCAT is not ready; because of capacity issues, we simply cannot do it at this time and he thinks the report and packet of information will be very useful when we reach the goalposts; then we can take the reports off the shelf and see if we can start implementing some of them. The next committee meeting, if needed, is scheduled for Thursday November 10 at 11:00 am.

Transit Service Committee – The Transit Service Committee did not meet in October. E. Amos added that TCAT is evaluating service on a weekly basis, to make sure we can meet the bare minimum that's been set. They evaluate levels at the end of every week and send out notices to the public, what service will be like; any reduced routes, or restoration of trips.

Next Meeting

The next regular Board meeting is the annual meeting on December 1, 2022.

Executive Session

At 5:05pm F. Proto made a motion to enter into Executive Session to discuss the employment history of a particular person and collective bargaining negotiations. D. Thompson seconded the motion (vote 7-0-0) and the Board moved into Executive Session.

At 5:28pm, J. Ellis-Grove, C. Marsh, M. Smith and S. Vanderpool left the Executive Session. At 5:44pm D. Thompson moved to leave Executive Session and return to open session. L. Holmes seconded and the motion was approved 7-0-0.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 5:45 pm, motion by D. Thompson, seconded by L. Holmes.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Taylor Hessler, Recording Secretary, January 26, 2023.