

Riders' Advisory and Accessibility Committee

Meeting Minutes

Monday, January 9, 2023

ATTENDEES: Erik Amos (TCAT), Bruce Babcock, Suzanne Burnham, Blaine Friedlander, Kenneth Glover, Jenn Jennings (TCAT), Robert Lynch, Meloney McMurry, Dwight Mengel, Patty Poist (TCAT), Carlene Swick, Denise Thompson (TCAT Board of Directors), Julie Weaver, Kristen Wells (Gadabout)

APOLOGIES: Ed Swayze, Scot Vanderpool

Meeting called to order by Patty Poist at 4:30 pm

September & November meeting minutes approved.

Intro

Patty Poist announced that that Spring service will be in effect from January 22 through May 27th. TCAT started out thinking there was going to be a public hearing. There were some service reductions over the 20% threshold that triggers the need for a public hearing and 30 days' notice, according to TCAT's internal service standards policy. TCAT planners were still working to try and restore as much service as possible and there was no way that TCAT was going to be able to present that information 30 days ahead of time.

During that time TCAT lost 1-2 more drivers and additional night service had to be cut. TCAT intends for these cuts to be temporary, and not lasting more than 180 days. TCAT also decided that without the ability to add service or to make changes based on feedback, holding a public hearing would be disingenuous. Planners did everything possibly to give the best service possible with limited resources.

In the absence of a public hearing, TCAT will still be getting the word out about the service cuts and taking feedback from the public through the usual channels. TCAT is taking a number of steps to remedy this situation including revving up the driver training program to get driver candidates trained faster and on a timelier basis. At present, classes start monthly, but TCAT plans to have twice as many classes while recruitment continues in earnest.

Patty reiterated that this is the worst labor market that has existed in years. TCAT is hoping that within the next couple of months the situation will begin to improve and TCAT will be able to start restoring service.

October System Report: Erik Amos

Erik Amos gave an overview of the system report which gives some background on what led to the decisions that were made regarding spring service. October is the most recent system report. There will be a full report ready for the beginning of the year that can be shared at the next meeting.

Erik explained that October is when things started to get difficult for TCAT, but it also tells the story. Year to date ridership in 2022 was up 33% over 2021. However, October 2022 ridership was down 30%. Rural ridership has not declined as much as campus and urban ridership. 2022 ridership started out well above 2021, but by summer began to decline. August, September, and October 2022 ridership was significantly less than 2021 and that trend has continued into November as well.

There are two main factors for this loss in ridership. One of the reasons is data. The farebox system is failing, resulting in a loss of ridership data. We are able to project pretty closely and we know that the actual ridership is more than the data we have, but still below 2021 levels. The real reason for the drop in ridership is that TCAT had to cut service.

TCAT planned to cut service for fall but found that service had to be continually cut on a daily then weekly basis. As TCAT's ability to provide service declined, people rode the bus less. The need to cut service is evident in the number of missed trips. Missed trips is a record of service that had to be cancelled on a daily or weekly basis due to lack of buses or bus operators.

In October there were over 700 missed trips due to bus shortage. There were slightly less missed trips in November. There were only a few missed trips due to driver shortage, but this is misleading. Even if there had been available buses, there would still be a high number of missed trips due to lack of drivers.

In October, TCAT employed two different strategies to manage cutting service. During the first two weeks, dispatch was evaluating the ability to operate service on a daily basis. If a route had to be cut, routes with high-frequency service and routes with overlapping service within certain geographic areas were cut first. Most of these cuts affected certain campus and city routes while trying to avoid cutting rural routes. It is difficult to provide service to rural areas when an entire route is cut.

After a couple of weeks, TCAT was still not able to make pull-out and service was being cut further and further into urban and campus services to the point where TCAT would be forced to cut entire routes or cut into rural service. The decision was made to cut into rural service but TCAT wanted to make sure that people had enough time to plan in advance and make other arrangements.

Between the two approaches, fewer trips were cut in the second half of the month than in the first half. The highest impacted routes were still the 10, 17, 30, 81, and 83, but they were impacted to a lesser degree during the last two weeks of the month. The October system report is a good illustration of what TCAT faced going into spring service planning.

Spring Service Changes starting January 22

Routes 53, 83, and 92 had to be eliminated. Most service is ending by 8pm, with a few exceptions.

Routes 14 and 51 are interlined, meaning a route 14 will turn into a route 51 when it ends at the Commons while another 51 is ending at the Commons and turning into the next route 14.

Route 14 will express out to the hospital via route 96 in the morning, and will be express down from the hospital in the afternoon and early evening. It will still serve West Hill, but will only serve it in one direction. This will not be as convenient, but it was necessary for scheduling.

Routes 14 and 51 are reduced on the weekends and will only run every other hour. **Route 51** will NOT use College Avenue due to construction and unpredictable road closures.

College Avenue: Route 10 will continue to use Stewart Ave. **Route 30** will resume using College Avenue next week when the road reopens and **route 90** will use College Avenue in two weeks when Spring service begins.

Route 11 will end service earlier but will have more frequent service compared to the last service period. It will now run every 45 minutes instead of every hour.

Route 32 will have a later trip and will also serve Village Solars on the weekend.

Eric explained that planners have looked closely at how service is tracking with the Transit Development Plan (TDP) recommendations. The TDP begun in 2018 and was published at the end of last year and serves as a guiding document in how TCAT rolls out plans and moves forward. The TDP was developed based on community needs and best practices and was not written with the idea that TCAT would have an insufficient number of operators or buses. Unfortunately, TCAT is not in a position to carry out the recommendations in the schedule.

Blaine Friedlander used to depend on route 51 to get to work in Collegetown but had to start driving to work when route 51 stopped serving College Avenue. Blaine asked if route 51 could return to College Avenue once construction ends. Eric responded that construction has temporarily stopped on College Avenue, but is set to begin again later in the spring. Keeping route 51 out of Collegetown allowed it to be interlined with route 14. This configuration is more efficient and helped TCAT to save on buses and operators.

Eric added that TCAT plans to return route 51 to Collegetown, but it probably will not happen in the spring. Blaine expressed his frustration with TCAT not making accommodations for real world situations at a time when its ridership is falling. Eric explained that because routes 51 and 14 are interlined, changing route 51 in the middle of the service period is not possible and will have to remain that way, at least until summer. Unfortunately, this is the one way that TCAT can make it work in terms of scheduling, given the number of buses and operators available.

Suzanne Burnham admonished TCAT for allowing the priorities of Cornell and Ithaca College to take precedence over workers and local commuters. Suzanne cited the interlining of routes and the increased frequency of route 11 to IC. Suzanne expressed disappointment that the burden seems to fall on locals, like Blaine, working to serve their community.

Patty attested that planners made every effort to preserve service, as evidenced by routes 20, 21, 36, 65, and 67 being left alone. While Cornell is the largest employer in the area and has the largest mass of people, Patty has never witnessed planners trying to appease Cornell over the

greater community. Planning is a balancing act between serving the most riders, while trying to preserve service in areas of less density. Eric agreed and added that in addition to serving where the most riders are, TCAT is also trying to serve where the need is. Sometimes the need is based on where the riders are, but it is also based on areas where people don't have other options.

Eric refuted the idea that TCAT favors Cornell or Ithaca College. Service was cut where it needed to be cut because there was no other choice and that included the elimination of two Cornell routes. TCAT anticipates pushback from Cornell over these cuts.

Similarly, IC was upset when route 11's night service was cut back. Some of the service was restored because it simplified scheduling. Route 11 had run hourly because it was interlined with another route. In the spring, route 11 will be operated by one bus, every 45 minutes, which will allow for trips to be cut, if necessary.

TCAT is preparing for the reality that, despite these deep cuts, additional trips may need to be cut on top of that. Currently TCAT is not able to provide the service that has been promised and additional cuts are being made daily. Some of the changes that have been made for spring make it easier to cut trips on a day-to-day basis, should it become necessary.

Eric stressed that TCAT's main goal was to maintain service as much as possible. Unfortunately, it has gotten to the point where TCAT is forced to cut additional service on a daily basis and planners tried in earnest to make those decisions easier and fair.

Recruitment of Bus Operators

Blaine asked how this group can help TCAT get more drivers. Patty responded that committee members can share TCAT's careers page at: www.tcatbus.com/careers/ and share that TCAT pays a livable wage and offers good compensation. TCAT is currently in negotiations with the UAW, which will probably net even better benefits.

Patty thanked Kenneth Glover for his help in getting the word out about TCAT jobs. Mr. Glover has been handing out brochures to groups and people he knows. TCAT also has a dedicated recruiter who is very active and sits on many boards. If anyone has suggestions about places to advertise job openings, please let Patty know.

It is important to mention that prospective bus operators do not have to hold a CDL to apply. TCAT will train people to get their CDL license. Currently, TCAT is ramping up its training program to get more operators trained more quickly. It is difficult for someone looking for a job often have to take another job rather than wait around for the next class to start. Having more training opportunities will help with this issue. One of TCAT's dispatchers has moved over to the training department to help with this effort.

The goal for fall is to have 70 bus operators, which is below where we wanted to be last fall. TCAT is hoping to bring in 8-12 new drivers per month, which allows for attrition and loss of drivers who do not make it through training.

Patty added that newer drivers with less seniority get the more difficult shifts. The first few years can be tough, particularly if the driver has a family. Blaine suggested a pay differential for those

tougher shifts. Patty responded that TCAT does pay premium pay in certain circumstances. Some operators report that it is not just the money. They want to be home with their families. Many bus operators don't live right in Ithaca or even within the greater Ithaca area, so they are not able to go home if they have a split shift and commuting to and from work further extends their work day.

Bruce Babcock asked if TCAT posted the hours of work so that drivers may choose the shifts that work best for them. For example, some people prefer to work the night shift. Patty explained that before every service period, the work shifts are presented to the drivers in a "bid packet". Drivers choose their runs based on seniority, with the most senior drivers having first choice of available shifts. Newer drivers end up with the shifts that are left.

TCAT is working on making the drivers' lounge more comfortable for drivers to rest during their split shifts. It is often difficult to draw down capital money, so that is an issue too. Patty assured the group that TCAT is fighting this issue on all fronts, but acknowledged that it is a slow and agonizing process. We are doing our best.

Erik got a DM asking what can be done to help students get back to Ithaca after taking evening classes at TC3. Regrettably, TCAT was forced to cut the last route 43 trip and there is not a good solution at this time. Erik reiterated that TCAT did not want to make any of these cuts, but there was no other choice.

Farebox

Patty announced that TCAT has awarded a bid. The chosen vendor is a "big" vendor but has not been publicly announced yet. Erik explained that this vendor does not have any upfront costs like many others and has a slightly lower ongoing cost. There are also a lot of options in terms of being able to expand, update, and maintain the system. Some of the other services offered were more like software as a service, which has its advantages. The vendor we chose has a software as a service component, but they have been around for a while so they have also been building up the hardware.

The new system will be able to accept cash and will also be able to read the magnetic strips on Cornell's cards which will make the transition with Cornell easier. They also have some other options that would work with other area institutions as well. Patty added that the actual work is going to start fairly soon and TCAT hopes to have the fareboxes fixed by this summer.

Patty emphasized that this is a game changer for TCAT when it comes to collecting fares and getting good data for analysis. TCAT hired a new analyst and that data is extremely important for reporting to the National Transit Database, FTA, among others.

TCAT Board of Directors Reorganization

At the TCAT Board of Directors meeting, on the 4th Thursday of January, at 4pm, there will be a Board reorganization. Patty announced that the new 2023 Chair for the TCAT BOD is a member of this committee and our board liaison, Denise Thompson. Denise has been an involved TCAT rider, even before sitting on the board.

County legislator Deborah Dawson will replace Dan Klein on the board. Deborah is an active county legislator and former TCAT board member. There will be a press release out around the

26th of January after Denise chooses her committee members for auditing, human resources, budget, and transit service, executive, and planning committees. The board is helping TCAT deal with the major challenges that we are facing.

Denise thanked the committee for their feedback, saying that their care and concern for drivers, riders, and staff is so evident and important to TCAT's mission. Denise invited committee members to contact her with any information or opinions and pledged to take her term as chair very seriously. Patty voiced her appreciation for Denise's investment in TCAT as a faithful rider, board member, and now chairperson.

Other Questions

Farebox: Blaine asked if the tap feature will still work on the Cornell cards. Erik responded that Cornell's tap feature is old technology. This is 20-year-old technology and none of the vendors support it, so the tap feature will not work. There will be a smart card feature that will allow for tapping but this would use a separate card than what Cornell is currently using.

Blaine asked if Cornell folks will be issued the smart cards. Erik answered that this is something that needs to be worked out with Cornell and if they are willing to go through the process, TCAT is willing to facilitate it. Blaine asked the board to consider this. Denise Thompson remarked that there is a lot to consider and work through. Denise commended the team that found this farebox system for identifying the best of what was submitted. There is a smart phone feature but there is a lot that has to be worked out. The bottom line is that the current system is not providing us with information and we are losing data and money. The new system will help TCAT in the long run and Denise is confident that the right people are having the right conversations.

Erik added that the smart phone feature is an app with that creates a scannable QR code. Denise is impressed with the system that was chosen because it works for vulnerable community members as well as those who are lucky enough to have a smartphone. This system is taking us in the right direction and TCAT and Cornell will get this worked out.

Bus Operator Schedule: Bruce Babcock raised the issue of drivers being forced to take a bid that does not work for them. Bruce asked if there was a way to expand the choices or make the runs better or to make the bids more flexible. Some drivers are older and need a decent bid so they can get home earlier at night. Bruce understands that there are good runs that everyone wants, but the turnover at TCAT is due to those being forced to work long hours and drivers get worn out. Bruce asked if there could be more bids with less hours? Some drivers do want the overtime, but others just want the job, the benefits, and then be able to go home. TCAT should also be focusing on the health of the drivers.

Erik thanked Bruce for the feedback and agreed that this is something TCAT has wrestled with for a long time. The less drivers TCAT has, the less bids that can be created, and the less flexibility there is. This creates a downward spiral.

Bruce clarified that if TCAT were able to post the bids well in advance, not just a week ahead of time, they might be able to attract drivers. Erik asserted that TCAT would like to get to a place where bids are presented well in advance, bids have more flexibility, and hours are more humane.

Bus 1113: Carlene Swick saw bus 1113 out and about and wondered if it had been salvaged after the catastrophic fire it had several years ago on route 96. Erik Amos did some quick investigating and reported that 1113 had gone through an inspection a week ago but did not pass. It may be out or about to go out, so it could be possible. Patty will check into this further.

Wrapped Buses: Bob Lynch asked if passengers can see out of the windows on the “moving billboard” buses, specifically the Simmons Rockwell and Cayuga Medical Center wrapped buses. Patty responded that the decals are perforated, so you can see out, but not in. Some people complain that they don’t like it and there is still a bit of a haze. Patty also acknowledged the irony of wrapping an electric bus with a giant car ad.

Bob finds the wrapped buses to be unattractive, and not a good fit in Tompkins County, though he understands the financial reasons for allowing it. TCAT is facing lower ridership and Bob voiced his concern that people may not use TCAT if they find riding these buses uncomfortable because they can’t see or they feel boxed in.

Patty answered that in 2007 or 2008, there was a big controversial board meeting to talk about all ads on buses and they relented. A few years ago, TCAT also gave in to bus wrap advertisements because they do generate profit and Cayuga radio Group sells these installs. TCAT contracts with CRG who sells the ads, does the artwork, and installs the ads. TCAT gets 40% of the profit. Patty is only aware of 1 person who complained because she is claustrophobic.

Carlene observed that it is more difficult to see out of the wraps on the electric buses than it was to see out of the diesel buses. It is difficult to see out of the wrap when it is dark. Patty agreed that the wrapped buses are not the most attractive, but also understands that TCAT needs the money it generates. Julie Weaver suggested that half of the window be left uncovered. In one case, part of a wrap had to be removed because it was a visibility / safety issue.

Patty will ask Cayuga Radio group about the possibility of having half-wrapped windows. Bob Lynch suggested looking into how much these contribute to TCAT’s bottom line to see if they are really worth it. Patty will talk with Chet at CRG and TCAT’s controller about that.

Issue: Bruce asked what happened to the 10am route 21 this morning. Jenn Jennings checked with dispatch and the driver had to be replaced so the bus was 15-20 minutes late.

Meeting adjourned at 5:50 PM