Riders' Advisory and Accessibility Committee

Meeting Minutes
Monday, March 14, 2022

ATTENDEES: Rick Adams (Faith Group), Tyler Buente (Faith Group), Shari Herman (Faith Group), Mike Yanko (Faith Group), Roderick Cort, Blaine Friedlander, Dwight Mengel, Patty Poist (TCAT), Megan Pulver (TCAT), Ed Swayze, Carlene (Jett) Swick, Scot Vanderpool (TCAT), Julie Weaver, Kristen Wells (Gadabout), Matt Yarrow (TCAT)

APOLOGIES: Jenn Jennings (TCAT)

MEETING HANDOUTS: None – Virtual meeting via Zoom

Meeting called to order by Patty Poist at 4:34 pm

Title VI Plan (Dwight Mengel): Dwight explained that both Tompkins County and TCAT have a Title VI plan in compliance with federal law, and both entities have an interest in raising awareness within the community. Dwight gave a brief background of the plan.

Tompkins County receives federal funding for transportation, much of which is allocated to TCAT to operate service, buy vehicles, and was even used to build the TCAT facility. As the recipients of federal funds, the County, and TCAT need to make sure they are fulfilling their responsibilities to the federal government. Every three years they are required to submit a report and to publish and modify Title VI procedures. Title VI is part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance.

Part of our responsibility is to make sure members of the community are aware that these civil rights protections exist. Furthermore, if someone has a complaint, they need to know what to do and how to file it. The FTA looks at how well the County and TCAT make this information available to the public through postings and notices on buses, websites, and in schedule books.

When we write our report, we explain how we make this information available and we also analyze what has happened over the past three years. TCAT will be presenting its Title VI plan before the TCAT Board of Directors. The County will be presenting its umbrella plan before the county legislature on April 5.

Dwight stressed that the County and TCAT will be very responsive to any complaints or suggestions on improving our communications with the public. Patty Poist will provide Dwight's contact information to anyone who has any thoughts or comments about this.

General Manager's Report (Scot Vanderpool): January 2022 System Report

Ridership: TCAT had just over 98 thousand riders for the month of January, compared to 51 thousand in January 2021. That is a 92% increase over January of last year. The largest change was in the campus circulators, but it is important to note that rural ridership is up 44.3% and

Gadabout ridership is up 21.4%. TCAT monthly ridership for January is 33% of what it was in 2019, pre-pandemic. Cornell delayed their on-site activities until February 7 and since classes resumed in February, ridership is up to 65% of where it was in 2019. As we move into the Spring semester, we will have to see if those numbers will move back into the 70-75% range we were in last Fall 2021.

We don't have a lot of concrete numbers yet but we have heard from drivers that there have been an increased number of passengers since gas prices started to go up. We do believe that the current gas prices are going to drive ridership up.

Bus Statistics: Diesel buses averaged about 4.18 MPG in January, while the electric buses ran about 12.7 MPGE (equivalent - based on comparable Kilowatt hours). It is a good time to have electric buses in the TCAT fleet and TCAT is hopeful that it will make a difference. TCAT currently has 7 electric buses and is in the process of purchasing 5 more.

Operations and Maintenance: TCAT is hovering at around 70% on PM inspections. There were 6 road calls in January, which is about 5.87 road calls per 100K miles, compared to 8 road calls in December.

Missed Trips: There were 239 missed trips in January, 123 of which were due to driver shortage, which has been an issue nationwide. Many of the missed trips due to driver shortage occurred over the course of one particular weekend. 76 missed trips were due to a bus shortage, which is partially due to supply chain issues with parts.

Fuel costs: This report came out before the gas prices began to escalate, but diesel prices have gone from $2.76 To just over $4.30 per gallon in the past year and they are still climbing. Scot reported that during the fuel crisis of 2008, for every 10% increase in gas prices, US demand for public transit increases by 1.4%. While the rising fuel costs are costing us quite a bit more for diesel fuel, we are expecting to get some additional ridership.

Safety: There were 2 non-preventable accidents in January 2022 with no injuries compared to 6 accidents in January 2021.

Human Resources: TCAT is currently down to 66 full-time bus operators. Before the pandemic we had over 80. We have 8 part-time bus operators and 122 total employees. TCAT lost 4 bus operators in January and recruiting efforts are continuing. TCAT has since hired an employee specifically to focus on recruiting. This strategy has paid off and we already have 5 new drivers lined up for our upcoming class.

Marketing: Patty and Jenn have been compiling TDP feedback, working on press releases, updating the website and schedule book. They have also been working on materials for the triennial review.

Information Technology: IT reports that GTFS is up and running on Swiftly and Google. For those who may not know, GTFS stands for General Transit Feed Specification and allows transit agencies to publish their transit data in a format that can be used by a wide range of software applications.

IT Roadmap: Megan Pulver, TCAT's Project Manager, introduced Faith Group, the consultants who TCAT has hired to work on the IT roadmap. The IT roadmap loos at all of TCAT's internal software, hardware, IT-related applications and also some external tools available to riders. Rick Adams, Director of Technology at Faith Group gave explained that the group is interested in hearing feedback from the committee and then gave a brief background of the project and the purpose of the overall effort. The project covers TCAT's IT environment and technology systems. Currently the team is focusing on the existing conditions assessment, which includes the stakeholder assessment. Understanding systems, processes, and tools that are used every day, both internally, and interfacing with riders.

The next stage is gap analysis to understand how to elevate the existing conditions to meet TCAT's IT goals. Then the IT roadmap details projects and recommendations and leads to the implementation program. There is a lot of documentation with meaningful, actionable plans that can be kept up to date and used.

Mike Yanko, Faith Group's Systems Analyst explained that the group has already met internally with IT and other TCAT departments to try and understand different perspectives. The group prepared some questions to get the perspectives of Riders Advisory members. Mike went on to say that the goal is to look for opportunities for improvement and to understand how TCAT currently operates.

Patty Poist gave an overview of committee members and the areas they represent:
Blaine Friedlander – Cornell;
Kristen Wells – Executive Director of Gadabout
Carlene (Jett) Swick – Long time rider of route 21 from Trumansburg
Suzanne Burnham – Another long-time rider who also served as a TCAT Ambassador during the TDP process.
Roderick Cort: Finance person at Cornell
Ed Swayze – Is a longtime community leader who lives at McGraw House, a residential facility on a busy shopping route.
Julie Weaver- Another long-time rider with extensive knowledge of the TCAT system.

The members of this committee often help other riders, particularly those who are new to or confused by the TCAT system. They also function as an extra set of eyes and ears and let us know what is happening out in the field.

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QUESTIONS: Mike Yanko started by asking questions about rider satisfaction, on-demand transit, and safety.

Question: When was the last time there was outreach or a rider satisfaction survey sent out to riders?
    Answer: Patty answered that there was a survey done in 2020 as part of the TDP process. There was a survey specific to demand and response service done in 2018, ahead of the Tconnect project. In 2020 there was a survey done specific to rider comfort in the time of COVID.

Question: What is the primary method for getting feedback or is that the purpose of this group?
    Answer: Patty responded that this committee serves as one component of how TCAT gets rider feedback. The TDP process used several methods for gathering feedback including an online,

interactive feature that also showed trade-offs. TCAT also does tabling at events like orientation in the fall and attending community events like Streets Alive! Mike asked that TCAT share the results of the surveys with Faith Group.

Question: Are Uber and Lyft popular modes of transportation in this area?
    Answer: Patty's sense is that they are both popular but had not had a significant effect on TCAT's ridership. Suzanne Burnham has heard from bus drivers that many students at Cornell would rather take an Uber two blocks than walk or wait for TCAT. Some of TCAT's routes stop running earlier in the evening and people who work later or want to go out in the evening use Uber and Lyft to get back home. This is also the case on weekends when TCAT typically offers less service.

    Mike followed up by asking if Uber and Lyft usage was primarily caused by lack of bus service. Suzanne responded that availability was one of the reasons but people also used Uber and Lyft for immediate service without having to walk to a bus stop.

    Julie Weaver said in her experience, people used Uber and Lyft because it was easier. It does not require transferring or figuring out which buses to take and people like the ease of going directly from where they are to their destination.

    Matt Yarrow weighed in that in looking at the data, TCAT has seen the biggest impact on ridesharing has been in the evening. The most popular rides are happening in and around town and campus. There are others who use Uber and Lyft to get home if they miss their bus. For inbound trips and running errands in rural areas, there just aren't Ubers or Lyfts available.

Topic: Driver attention and Safety
Question: Have you ever rode on the bus and had a driver who was not attentive or operating the bus safely, for example texting while driving or occupied by other distractions? This question is being asked because it may lead to technology to monitor and correct these types pf behavior over time.
    Answer: Blaine Friedlander reported that he has been a regular rider, riding almost every day since 2013, and has noticed that drivers have been incredibly attentive. Blaine was surprised by the question because he has never seen this behavior before.

Question: If there was a situation where someone felt unsafe or wanted to report something, what is the best way to report unsafe conditions or incidents?
    Answer: Suzanne answered that members of the committee are able to email Patty, who is always very responsive and passes the feedback along to the appropriate people. Julie stated that people can also email TCAT at tcat@tcatmail.com. Patty noted that there is also a complaint form on TCAT's website in addition to TCAT's main phone number. TCAT also gets feedback through its Facebook page.

Question: Regarding E-alerts, is this subscription well known or implemented at TCAT?
    Answer: Patty responded that Phil Smith, TCAT's safety manager, rolled out the E-lerts a few months ago. Scot added that it is an internal program where supervisors, drivers, or staff can report any safety issues that are seen out in the field. Once an issue is reported, it immediately becomes a regularly generated report. E-lerts is a fairly new program and TCAT is one of the first ones in the state to use it. It is intended for internal use and not as a means of getting public feedback.

Topic: Route Efficiency

Question: Does everyone feel that the buses are adequately placed throughout the community that reaches people when needed? Are there any specific geographic areas where you would like to see services expanded?

> **Answer:** Carlene Swick answered that, in general, the rural service is very valuable. Most places do not have the kind of services we have. Even though Carlene lives over ten miles from work, she is able to drive to the park and ride and to ride in the rest of the way to work. There are quite a few trips per day, which is good availability for a rural area.
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> Patty noted that Matt Yarrow, TCAT's Assistant General Manager and Service Development Manager keeps a comprehensive record of rider feedback and considers all requests from the public. Matt added that TCAT tries to provide regular service within the city but rural service is costlier to run, in terms of driver hours and mileage on the buses. TCAT has not yet been able to build service back up to pre-COVID levels but that is the goal. Some of the rural could use more service in the future.

Question: How does TCAT solicit, organize, and make decisions based on feedback? How does TCAT socialize route changes?

> **Answer:** Patty responded that TCAT uses both social media and traditional methods to communicate changes. Feedback is received through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, as well as through an interactive feedback form. TCAT also issues press releases and puts signs on buses and in key shelters to announce service changes. Responding to all comments and complaints is important to TCAT.

Question: How accurate do you find the TCAT bus schedules, in terms of on-time arrivals.

> **Answer:** Suzanne stated that she rides routes 21, 11, 30 and sometimes route 65 and they are all good about being on time. Blaine agreed that in general, the timeliness is excellent. Routes 51, 31, 81, and 82 on campus are usually within a couple minutes of being on time. When buses are not on time, there is usually a reason for it. Julie Weaver stated that most routes are on time, but there is one route that is always late, especially when one particular driver is driving it. Roderick Cort stated that he did not have an issue with buses arriving on time.
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> Blaine added that sometimes bus drivers are not cognizant of the mobility of their riders. As a customer, it would be helpful if drivers lowered the buses when riders are trying to alight.

Question: How do you find out about schedule changes and detours? How effectively are TCAT's notifications regarding changes – either permanent or temporary?

> **Answer:** Carlene checks TCAT's home page regularly to make sure there are no detours affecting her route. TCAT does a good job of explaining what the changes will be and they are also good about removing notifications once the bus has returned to normal routing.
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> Blaine reported that he had an issue with route 51 in March. Route 51 alternates between serving Eastern Heights and Honness Lane. At one point the driver and the supervisor were confused about which trip they were supposed to be following. Blaine has been riding this route for 9 years and only learned about this change while riding the bus that evening. The driver refused to let Blaine off the bus at his stop and it later turned out that the driver was incorrect.

Ed Swayze used to ride TCAT often but now that he lives downtown, he generally walks and bikes to get around. Occasionally Ed will take TCAT in the evening to go to places and events that are further outside of town or on Cornell campus.

Scot Vanderpool noted that TCAT has a new tool called Swiftly that can be used to easily set up and communicate detours. Going forward, this will help TCAT communicate last-minute routing changes more easily and quickly.

Suzanne raised the issue of access to technology. Not everyone is technologically savvy or has access to a smart phone. Suzanne would like to see an interactive screen, on every bus and at key shelters, to notify people of changes and detours. They should announce which routes are coming, what time they will be departing, and on-time status.

Topic: Route Efficiency
Question: Have you ever been denied access to a bus because the bus was at maximum capacity and there was no space for you to board?

Answer: Blaine responded that he has experienced this in the morning on route 30. Sometimes this happens with route 10. Blaine has noticed that TCAT puts extra buses on the route to deal with morning capacity issue, which is great. Rick Adams asked if these issues could be solved by using a larger vehicle or if adding an extra bus is the only way to solve this issue. Blaine answered that adding extra busses at times when everyone is trying to get to class at the same time seems to be the best solution.

Technology: TCAT website
Question: Is the TCAT website easy to use, access, and navigate?

Answer: Suzanne and Blaine stated that both the desktop and mobile versions work well. Patty relayed a comment from a student who urged TCAT to make the website easier to use. Patty agreed that maybe the website should be simplified to make it easier to get to certain information. Patty stressed the importance of making the website more accessible for people with visual disabilities. Although TCAT has added plugins to make the website more accessible, it should be tested by someone who uses a screen reader to make sure they can access the information.

Rick encouraged committee members to reach out to him if they had any additional observations about the website or thoughts about making website navigation more intuitive. Comments can be emailed to the project manager at: Jason.Wallace@faithgroupllc.com

Question: Do you rely on social media to get updates from TCAT? Patty noted that TCAT sends out updates to Facebook and Swiftly posts directly to Twitter. Updates on MyStop post to both Twitter and Facebook.
Answer: Julie Weaver answered that she often sees posts on social media before it comes over on the app.

Question: Does you use public wifi on the buses? Does it meet your needs?
Answer: Suzanne stated that she uses it all the time. She does not use it to stream video or Netflix and mainly uses it to text. Carlene answered that she generally doesn't feel comfortable using

public Wi-Fi, but it has worked fine the few times she has tried it. Julie added that she does use the wifi to stream Netflix, which works fine until she switches from one bus to another. Rick noted that switching buses changes the SSID and requires switching from one network to another.

Question: Do you use TCAT's mobile apps regularly to get system information?
Answer: Blaine uses the apps to get real-time bus locations. Carlene also uses the apps to find out when to leave to go to the bus stop. Julie uses the Transit, Moovit and MyStop apps and sometimes uses the Google transit app for trip planning. Suzanne and Roderick both use the MyStop app.

Question: If you use more than one app, do you find that they give consistent information or does the information differ from one app to the next?
Answer: Julie reported that there are many inconsistencies between app information at her apartment complex. Sometimes the apps are confused about which direction the bus is headed.

Patty explained that MyStop uses a different data source than Moovit and Transit. MyStop pulls data from Avail while Moovit and MyStop use data from Swiftly. Swiftly has more accurate predictions so eventually TCAT will be pushing riders to migrate over to Transit app. At this time TCAT's in-app alerts go through Avail to MyStop and the website home page. While there are some things to work out, the plan is to have one information source through Swiftly.

Question: Is there additional functionality you would like to be added to the app that would be beneficial now or in the future?
Answer: Swiftly can only show one route at a time, while Avail can show multiple routes moving at the same time. Swiftly's map and bus tracker is not as comprehensive as Avail but TCAT is going to see if there is anything Swiftly can do about that.

Topic: Bus fare and Payment
Question: How do you prefer to pay for your bus fare? Cash, buying a card through the website, student pass or other method?
Answer: Blaine uses his Cornell staff ID card, which is one of the perks of working at Cornell. Suzanne uses her IC ID card. Julie likes the ease and convenience of the RFID key fob. Patty noted that TCAT has gotten many requests for, and has been looking into, mobile pay.

TCAT is hoping to go fare-free for youth age 17 and under, and students enrolled in high school. TCAT plans on working with the school districts to distribute youth pass cards to students 15 and over.

Question: Do you have any other feedback or suggestions for improvement?
Answer: Blaine asserted that TCAT drivers are incredibly helpful. They go out of their way to help their customers. Suzanne agreed that she once witnessed a driver stop the bus and walk a visually impaired rider across the street. The human aspect of interacting with drivers is exceptional.

Scot mentioned that going forward, all new electric buses will have USB ports for riders to use while on board.

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Other Issues

Julie reported an issue regarding bus stop announcements. Julie boards the bus on Albany @ Salvation Army. Buses change signs between Seneca and Green. Riders on the bus are not always aware that the bus is changing to a different route. Is there a way to let people know when the bus changes its route sign? For example, a bus that was a route 30 at Seneca, changed to a route 53 in between. Maybe the bus could announce that it is changing to a different route.

Matt responded that this is a challenge on the back end. Only one headsign code is allowed per trip. The route previous route shows on the headsign until it gets to Green. Because of the way the buses have to move in a loop around the Commons, it is a unique situation and there is not a good way to deal with this situation.

Suzanne spoke with Sam Schwartz at Ithaca College about and they were chatting about TCAT and the advisory committee. Suzanne suggested inviting him to the next advisory committee or to a board meeting to talk about the mask mandate. Suzanne will extend the invite to the board meeting on May 26 at 4pm.

Meeting Adjourned at 6:10 PM

Next meeting May 9, 2022 at 4:30pm