



Riders' Advisory and Accessibility Committee

Meeting Minutes

Monday, May 9, 2022

ATTENDEES: Bruce Babcock, Kerry Barnes, Jeff Boles, Suzanne Burnham, Ken Glover, Vanessa Greenlee, Jenn Jennings (TCAT), Patty Poist (TCAT), Carlene (Jett) Swick, Scot Vanderpool (TCAT), Julie Weaver, Matt Yarrow (TCAT)

APOLOGIES:

MEETING HANDOUTS: None – Virtual meeting via Zoom

Meeting called to order by Patty Poist at 4:35 pm

Introductions:

Scot Vanderpool: TCAT General Manager

Carlene Swick: Route 21 rider for 6-7 years

Jeff Boles: Works at Fingerlakes Independence Center

Ken Glover: Ithaca community member

Bruce Babcock: Rider of route 21 who lives in Trumansburg.

Jenn Jennings: TCAT marketing assistant, paratransit coordinator, and graphic artist.

Matt Yarrow: TCAT Assistant General Manager who primarily does service development.

Kerry Barnes: Rides route 11. Lives on South Hill and works with the TCPLibrary Foundation.

General Manager's March System Report (Scot Vanderpool)

Ridership: Ridership has been up consistently over the first quarter of 2021. There has been a 90% increase in rural ridership, which is a true indication that things are turning around. This is a very good sign for TCAT. Ridership is working its way back up and currently at about 75-80% of 2019 pre-pandemic levels.

Bus Statistics: Parts cost per mile is an important statistic to look at and the electric buses are averaging 14¢ per mile in parts. While diesel buses are getting an average of 4.5 MPG, the electric buses are averaging 13.8 mpg equivalent.

Maintenance: Preventative maintenance is up to 94%, which is a vast improvement over the previous months. There were 12 road calls in March. There were 15.5 missed trips, mainly due to driver shortages.

Finance: TCAT ran at a deficit during the first quarter due to fuel costs, cost of insurance, and other miscellaneous factors. The average cost of fuel was \$3.47 with a devastating cost of nearly \$123K in March alone when fuel was nearly \$4 per gallon. The rising price of fuel is a concern for us. The cost of parts has been relatively steady over the past 6-7 months.

Accidents: There were 3 collisions in March, all preventable, and involved contact with stationary objects. College Avenue has long been a problem area. There have been no major accidents so far.

HR: TCAT currently has 65 full-time drivers. TCAT is short on drivers so if you know anyone, send them our way. TCAT will provide training and all that is required is a clean (or almost clean) driving record.

Marketing: TCAT is excited to announce the new FreeRyde program which will allow youth to ride TCAT for free. Youth age 17 and younger and anyone currently enrolled in high school will not have to pay a fare to ride TCAT. For this group of residents, this opportunity gives them a chance to try out TCAT and get comfortable riding the bus. This also benefits TCAT by ensuring the next generation of riders.

Ken Glover asked what percentage of underrepresented minorities and women who have become bus drivers as a result of outreach efforts. Scot responded that TCAT tries hard to reach out to various sectors of the community to get everyone involved and on board. Scot did not have the exact numbers on hand, but will reach out to HR and try to get some numbers to share. Ken suggested adding this statistic to the next report.

Jeff requested that the system report be emailed out to the group.

Summer Service (Matt Yarrow)

Summer service change will go into effect on May 29, 2022. This is the same day that the Youth FreeRyde Program will go into effect. Traditionally summer service is a bit of a reduction from spring and fall service due to students leaving town and the reduction of activities on campus.

Particularly on Cornell's campus, there is not the demand for the high-frequency circulators. Route 81 will run at 15-minute intervals and route 82 will run at 30-minute intervals. Night service will also be trimmed, which TCAT typically does, especially since COVID. Route 90 and 92 will not be running this summer.

TCAT has been mindful of the driver situation and has tried to set service at a level that is realistic. TCAT does not want to put service on the street that will be difficult to fulfill. Route 10 frequency has been reduced significantly by about half of the trips. Although ridership does decrease during the summer, but TCAT also felt it was ok to make that cut because of the availability of alternative routes like route 30.

Route 11 was reduced to hourly service to reduce the number of drivers needed. Route 31-41 will not change but it will be renamed route 31. Most of the rural service has not changed or the changes are very minor.

Route 77 has operated in Lansing and Etna as an on-demand service for the past year and a half. The grant funding for that project will be ending at the end of May. This leaves TCAT in an awkward place because TCAT does not have a contract with the on-demand provider outside of the grant. TCAT will be moving route 77 to fixed route service for now. When TCAT is ready to incorporate on-demand service in the kind of service that is regularly provided, route 77 may go back to on-demand again. One of the benefits of operating on-demand is that service can be

provided in a larger service area and TCAT can see where demand is developing in areas that previously did not have transit.

Although the on-demand service has been working well, TCAT will not be able to count on that technology platform this summer. Route 77 will now operate as fixed route service on two loops. One will serve Warren Road and the Lansing Town Hall while the other will serve Etna and both will terminate at the mall. From the mall there is good connectivity to route 30 which runs every 30 minutes.

Route 22 is TCAT's summer only route that provides service to the parks. Weekend service will start at the beginning of the service period on May 29. There will be 4 trips per day to Lower Treman, Buttermilk, and Taughannock. Weekday service will begin at the end of June when the public school are out of session. There are 3 camps using this route but they are also open to the public. Another perk of using the bus to go to the park is that you won't have to pay the parking fee!

Vanessa Greenlee is happy to hear that demand began to materialize once service was brought to new areas. Vanessa would like to see the grant report once it is complete. Matt responded that the report will be a public document and could possibly be posted on the website. Matt was hoping to make on-demand service seamless at the end of the grant, but realistically it means that TCAT has to procure smaller vehicles. It doesn't make sense to use full-size buses for on-demand service so TCAT would need to get a set of 8-15 passenger vans. TCAT would also need the technology platform that makes it all possible. TCAT would probably need to define a different class of driver who may not require the CDL credentials that full-size bus drives require.

There is work to be done but there is also an opportunity to onboard drivers with less training, less overhead, and it also might be a way in for people to become bus drivers.

Farebox Upgrade

A couple of years ago TCAT had started looking into updating the fare collection system but there have been some roadblocks. Matt explained that about three years ago, TCAT issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a new farebox system. The responses that TCAT received were either very expensive, or they just did not have all of the necessary functionality that was needed.

TCAT decided to move forward with the current system and is working with one of the original developers to troubleshoot issues. While he is very knowledgeable and capable, it requires a lot of work and might be too much for one person to do without help. TCAT is keeping an open mind and considering putting out another RFP.

Another issue is that Cornell has a very specific technology that they use. Cornell uploads all of their own passes to the server which requires almost no work from TCAT. This process also allows Cornell students and staff to use their ID cards and fobs to board the bus without having to carry a separate bus card and Cornell is able to manage all of these ride privileges. This functionality is needed but does not come standard with available solutions and would require customization.

TCAT has contacted Cornell again to understand where there is flexibility and how we could move forward. TCAT wants to add functionality like an optical scanner and the ability to purchase tickets

through apps or to tap a credit card. At the same time, we want to keep the magstripe capabilities, which increases the complexity of the project.

Carlene had been concerned that some of the buses were missing their fareboxes. Matt explained that there had been an issue on the newer buses where the ramps were hitting the scanner unit. This caused several units to be split open. TCAT is working with a local company to develop smaller units to solve this issue. Again, he does not have time to repair and build all of these units himself.

Stop Announcements on buses

Bruce Babcock raised the issue of some of the buses not making stop announcements. Sometimes buses are making the wrong announcements. Other times the buses make the announcements internally, but there are no external announcements.

Bruce reported that when a bus pulls up, he often has to ask the driver which route they are. Some drivers will go out of their way to get off the bus to tell Bruce which route they are, while others will not even call out their route number. The majority of buses are not talking on the outside.

Matt replied that he is responsible for making sure stop announcements are sent out to the buses on the back end, and all of the trips have a sign code which tells them to announce which route they are on. According to the maintenance department, the external speakers are poorly designed. They are too low and do not hold up well when exposed to the elements. They become corroded and stop working fairly quickly.

Matt suggested pressing maintenance to go through, perhaps on an annual basis, to determine which speakers are not working. Speakers are probably not expensive and TCAT have a stockpile of them, since they only seem to last a year or two in service. Bruce observed that drivers may not even know if the external speakers are not working.

Financial Forecast

Vanessa Greenlee asked about the financial forecast for transit. Scot responded that over the past couple of years, TCAT has been very fortunate on the federal level. The biggest opportunity we have is with grants. There was leftover pork barrel money that TCAT applied for through Gillibrand's and Schumer's office. TCAT has also applied for the LoNo grant, which is bigger than ever, with \$800 million for transit agencies across the country. TCAT has asked for the money for 6 additional 40-foot buses, smaller electric vehicles, and infrastructure. There are many opportunities from the federal level. On the state level, State transportation Operating Assistance (STOA), our biggest revenue source, has remained fairly stable.

Scot went on to say that things seem to be in fairly good shape. TCAT is concerned about the overspending that has happened in the past couple of years with the Cares act and other one-time windfall funding sources. TCAT is going to put about \$7M away in a reserve in case TCAT does not get the expected funding over the next few years. Electrification is very expensive – electric buses cost \$1M each, which causes higher insurance costs. Rising fuel costs and the need to remain competitive with wages are also concerns for TCAT. Overall, TCAT is in decent shape.

Other issues

Bruce raised the issue of electric buses not being equipped with power steering. Bruce reported that another driver said pulling the brake handle is cutting up his hand.

Construction Season: Ken Glover asked if TCAT considers construction and takes into account how long it will take to get through construction areas, when setting the schedules for summer. Matt responded that getting a handle on traffic and construction is a challenge TCAT faces every year. During spring and fall, 5 buses operate on that route at 15-minute intervals. A round trip takes about 1 hour and 15 minutes per bus. The round trip used to be one hour. Over the past 10 years, route 30 has had to be slowed down in order to keep it on time. This requires significant increase in operational cost.

During the summer, traffic is reduced but construction increases. If it was solely based on ridership and traffic, we would be able to speed up the running times for many routes. College Avenue has been under construction for several summers in a row, forcing TCAT to detour. Route 30 will probably run tighter this summer due to other constraints like driver shortages and there may be some lateness due to the detour.

Route 51 will use Stewart, which tends to be quicker than College Ave. Ahead of every service change, TCAT tries to understand what the constraints are and tries to work within the constraints.

Public Surveys: Ken also asked if TCAT has considered conducting a public survey to find out where people think TCAT has excellent service and where the service is lacking. Matt answered that recently TCAT conducted a study on West Hill as part of the application for the electric mobility grant. TCAT is also working on a NYSEDA grant with a number of community stakeholders and a short survey was used to get more information, though it was not a system wide survey. Patty added that as part of TDP process, TCAT conducted a survey to gather information from riders and perspective riders.

Route 15: Ken noted that route 15 should use buses that are wider in the front to make boarding easier for people with packages and caregivers with strollers. Matt responded that route 15 typically uses a 40-foot low floor bus. During COVID TCAT increased service on route 15 because even though less people were riding to work, everyone still had the need to go shopping. Likewise, even though service was cut on other routes during the summer, route 15 frequency will remain the same.

Ken requested that larger buses, like the electric buses, be used on route 15 on Saturdays, particularly when the students return. Matt explained that TCAT usually does not send specific buses on specific routes, but makes those determinations based on placement in the garage and what is available. TCAT will ask dispatch to send out electric buses on route 15, when possible. Matt also added that because the electric buses do not have power steering, some drivers are not able to drive them.

COVID-19 Contingency Plan: Ken asked if TCAT is looking at a contingency plan to adjust how service is allocated so that the core service can still run if there are numerous operators out due to COVID-19 illness or exposure. Matt answered that TCAT did have this issue a few weeks ago and TCAT

looked at which trips could be cut with the least impact to service. While some rural service was cut, most of the cutting occurred on routes with higher frequency like campus routes 82 and 83. Night service was also cut back. The assumption is that rural riders don't have as many other options.

Masks: Ken asked if K-N95 masks had been made available to drivers and if test kits were also available and distributed to drivers. Patty responded that the county has been very good about providing TCAT with masks and tests. There was a shortage this past weekend, but TCAT will be getting those stocked again. Kerry Barnes added that the library also has masks and test kits available in the vestibule. Drivers and bus riders are welcome to come in if they are needed. The library also ran out over the weekend, but will getting more in within the next few days.

Ken suggested having an announcement on the bus, to remind people to wear their mask and to wear it properly. Patty responded that there is a message telling people they need to wear a mask but it does not remind people how to wear their mask properly.

Diesel Mechanic Training: Ken saw a flyer announcing that TCAT will train to become a diesel mechanic and asked if that was available to current bus drivers and what plans TCAT has to let the community know. Patty responded that yes, this offer is open to TCAT drivers and several drivers have gone over to the maintenance department.

TCAT has also hired a recruiter who has attended a number of job fairs and events to try and get the word out to other sectors of the community. Ken suggested that TCAT's recruiter set up a meeting to connect with the director of Workforce Ithaca, Southside Community Center, GIAC, as well as rural areas. Ken will provide Patty with email addresses for the directors.

Matt added that TCAT did participate in the job fair at Southside.

FLIC Volunteer Advocacy

Jeff Boles shared a flyer and encouraged joining the FLIC Volunteer Advocacy team. Jeff will share the flier via email to share with the group. Anyone interested can email Jeff at: jeff@fliconline.org or Rashke Bradley: rashke@fliconline.org

Meeting Adjourned at 5:45 PM

Next meeting July 11, 2022 at 6:00 pm