



Riders' Advisory and Accessibility Committee

Meeting Minutes

Monday, September 13, 2021

ATTENDEES: Jeff Boles, Suzanne Burnham, Tom Clavel (TCAT), Roderick Cort, Blaine Friedlander, Vanessa Greenlee, Jenn Jennings (TCAT), Trevor Jensen (TCAT intern), Dwight Mengel, Patty Poist (TCAT), Carlene (Jett) Swick, Denise Thompson (TCAT Board of Directors), Scot Vanderpool (TCAT), Theodora Weatherby, Julie Weaver, Kristen Wells (Gadabout), Matt Yarrow (TCAT)

APOLOGIES: None

MEETING HANDOUTS: None – Virtual meeting via Zoom

Meeting called to order by Patty Poist at 4:32 pm

General Manager's Report (Scot Vanderpool):

TCAT to Trails: On August 6, former Cornell professor of ecology and Marine Biology Myra Schulman announced the roll-out of the first "TCAT to Trails" map. There are many bus routes that serve area trailheads and now there is a map that can show you where they are. The map is now online and printed copies will also be available at Seneca and Green Street Station.

Freeville Station Park: Routes 40 and 43 were modified slightly in order to serve the new bus station and pocket park in Freeville, designed by David Fogel, Mayor of Freeville.

Ridership: July 2021 ridership was down 61% compared to July 2019. Our service development team tells us that ridership over the past several weeks has been encouraging and preliminary counts show that ridership is closer to being 30-35% less than it was pre-pandemic. Year to date (January – July) ridership is down 70% from 2019. In April 2020, TCAT hit an all-time low losing 95.7% of its ridership. That is a lot to recover from but TCAT ridership is steadily moving in the right direction.

Operations and Maintenance: In February 2021 TCAT's PM Services and wheel pulls were at 90%. In March 2021 that figure went up to 100%. We are currently at 95% on PM Inspections and 100% for wheel pulls.

There were 8 road calls in July and 7 in June. We believe that some of this is due to having newer buses on the road, including 7 electric buses that went into services earlier in the year. Fuel costs are almost identical to where they were in June, which is a bit surprising since we are seeing rising fuel costs at the pump.

Safety: There were 2 collisions in July 2021, 3 in June, 3 collisions plus 1 incident in May, and 4 collisions in April 2021. TCAT is working on getting E-lerts. E-lerts us is a program that tracks safety data and is great for audit purposes and helps reduce safety issues.

Human Resources: As of July 31, TCAT had 75 full-time operators (65 available), 7 part-time bus operators, and a total of 132 employees.

Driver Shortage: Scot had a meeting last week with NYPTA and many agencies are facing staffing challenges. There is a huge shortage of drivers. Some cities are even paying parents to drive students to school because they don't have the bus drivers to do it.

Transit agencies are facing the same issue. RTS in Rochester has been asked by New York State to help get kids to and from school. In order to help out, RTS had to cut service on some of their city transit lines. Centro is 35-40 drivers short and is having to cut their service in Syracuse.

TCAT is in a fairly good place and is ahead of the curve. TCAT has come up with some incentives and has focused on retention. One of the strategies is to offer a loyalty bonus to all employees who stay on through December. This seems to have worked so far.

Recruiting efforts have been successful and TCAT has also gone to several job fairs. There are 5 great drivers who are in training right now. We are hopeful that we are going to be in good shape to maintain the level of service we have.

TCAT Intern: Patty Poist introduced TCAT's new intern Trevor Jensen. Trevor is a student of urban planning at Cornell and has been interested in TCAT since his freshman year, two years ago. Trevor has photographed and collected data from transit systems all over the United States and is well versed in transit.

Trevor is sifting through the TCAT website, making sure the language is clear and the information is correct and up to date. Trevor is also working on outreach for Tconnect and social media marketing. Trevor is also beginning to track outdated bus stop signs that need to be updated.

Streets Alive! For the 11th year in a row, TCAT will be attending Streets Alive! on Sept. 19th. Cayuga Street in Fall creek will be closed to traffic to allow pedestrians to walk, bike wheel, and play in the street. TCAT will be on site with an electric bus to let folks check out the bus or try out using the bike rack in a no-pressure environment. Jenn Jennings will be there with supervisor Jerry Anderson, so stop down and see us!

Safety reminder for students (Julie Weaver): Julie Weaver is a long-time rider who works at the health department. Julie has observed students running in front of a moving bus so they don't have to wait for it to pass. The bus will stop and they continue to run in front of the bus. It would

be a good idea to remind students to use better judgement by not running in front of a 15 ton vehicle when it is in motion.

Patty responded that Cornell Transportation does have pedestrian safety seminars as well as biking safety seminars. TCAT also has signs in the bus instructing riders not to cross in front of the bus. Patty asked the committee for suggestions of ways to promote this type of information.

Julie suggested putting signs at bus stops for those who do not ride the bus and are not exposed to TCAT's interior bus signs and announcements. Scot Vanderpool agreed that this was a good point. Students who ride the bus might be more aware of the situation so it is likely that people who do not ride this bus need this messaging more than those who do.

Denise Thompson, TCAT board member and Cornell Off-Campus Living Manager is aware of this issue and appreciated that others have also observed this behavior. Cornell Transportation does try to get information out to the student population. Denise sends out a newsletter every other week to all student who live off campus. Denise will put a reminder in the newsletter. Denise is also part of the group that houses on-campus students.

Denise suggested that she and Patty work together to develop some language to send out. Patty agreed and also suggested that Trevor Jenson could take some photos to use as illustrations. The next newsletter will go out in about 2 weeks.

Jeff Boles suggested that TCAT put out a PSA. Patty added that a PSA might be picked up by the Cornell paper as well as other news outlets. Jeff also suggested putting together a safety brochure. Patty agreed that a multi-pronged approach would be best. Maybe an amusing video would be a good way to get the message out to more people. Unsafe pedestrian behavior can be seen anywhere, not just on campus.

Blaine Friedlander rides route 51 and has noticed that when the bus stops near East Hill Plaza, people will cross in front of the bus even though they are told not to. Blaine observed that there are often cars trying to get around the bus, which makes the situation very dangerous. Blaine suggested putting tent cards in the dining halls. Table tents are a great way to reach students at IC and Cornell.

Julie also observed unsafe behavior on Green Street that should also be included in the messaging. People are walking in between buses to cross the street. There is a lot going on with all of the traffic and construction, making the situation even more dangerous. Denise noticed that when the pandemic started, there were not many people out and that changed the way that people behave. It seems like people have forgotten how to share the road. Maybe the community needs to do some reeducation as well.

Dwight seconded the idea of an extremely short video. Dwight suggested having a video making contest to get creative input from young people. Dwight asked if there was a pop-up when riders try to sign into wi-fi. Patty responded that there is a disclaimer but she was unsure if other messaging could be added. Dwight suggested that would be a good place to get messaging across to riders. Patty will check with the IT department.

Bio-hazard cleaning protocol (Carlene Swick)

Carlene Swick witnessed someone getting sick on the bus and asked about the protocol for dealing with biohazards on the bus. Patty responded that if the bus driver is aware, the bus will be taken out of service immediately. A service is called in to professionally clean the bus. Buses with hard plastic seats are easier to clean than the fabric seats, which need to be taken out of service for more time.

Demand and response bus for Routes 20 and 21 (Suzanne Burnham)

Suzanne has heard from other riders that it is not enough buses to get to work and back in a reasonable amount of time, especially on the route 20. Route 20 has very limited route times and route 21 has a gap in the afternoon. Route 21 needs a bus at 8pm from Ithaca to Trumansburg for people who need to attend meetings and other events after working hours on weekdays.

Matt Yarrow responded that he has been trying to add later trips on the rural routes but admittedly, route 21 has less trips than pre-covid service. As we were planning fall service, we knew we were going to have issues with not having enough drivers. Instead of putting trips on the schedule that would potentially not be run, we decided to err on the side of trying to make the service something we could promise to operate.

As people return office jobs more consistently and rural ridership continues to increase, TCAT will look at increasing service on certain routes based on rider input and past schedules. There has been an increase in Cornell associated ridership but there are reports that in terms of office staff working downtown, it's about half of what it was pre-covid. This is a challenge for TCAT because it is hard to justify increasing service when the ridership is not there.

Matt appreciates the feedback gathered from talking to other riders on route 21. Knowing when the desired travel times are would be very helpful. Suzanne asked if demand and response service could be utilized in Trumansburg and Enfield. Matt responded that generally service picks up people within an area and brings them to a transfer point with fairly frequent service. The DAR service does not go all the way downtown or to Cornell.

From current feedback it seems that what is needed is for more trips to be added rather than the need for a completely different kind of service delivery model. On-demand service has the benefit of being able to reach areas where fixed route is not able to run and while Matt has heard the need for more service in Trumansburg, he has not heard from people trying to reach areas significantly off of the main corridor.

DAR service is not cheap but it allows TCAT to provide service to areas that have none. For this reason, Matt would prefer not to add a second type of services to areas that already have fixed route service. As part of the TDP, TCAT will continue thinking about on-demand service, where it is appropriate in our system, and where it matches the fixed route. As we see areas that are successful, then we can think about how to get it to other areas. We are still trying to figure that out. While we have had some success with the on-demand route 77 in Lansing, the Gadabout operated Tconnect service in Dryden really isn't generating ridership and we don't know why. Once we have figured out what works, then we can think about starting up in other areas.

Vanessa Greenlee reported that she has been hearing similar feedback from people in Enfield. Vanessa will be attending the Enfield fall festival and plans on having TCAT's survey from 2018 on hand to poll riders about specific times they would like to have service. Matt added that if we can get good information about how many riders we might expect at a certain time, that is very helpful to us. Even if it is only 6 people, it indicates that there may be more potential riders.

Matt has also put this message out to the planner at the county who is on the strategic tourism planning board. There are downtown employers, especially in the hospitality industry, who need ways to get their employees home late at night. TCAT would like to be able to serve people who work at non-traditional shift times but we don't have a way to get a good comprehensive data set for planning. Anecdotes are not enough. If we could work together to gather data in a more comprehensive way, it would help us make informed decisions about what is needed and what will have to wait until there is more data.

Vanessa has also been hearing from some of the labor unions and IBEW about early morning start times for crews who are working on construction projects for housing. Matt noted the importance of knowing what time people need to be to work because, as Suzanne said, if the bus gets there too early or too late, it won't work.

TCAT has been in contact with the downtown Ithaca Alliance and the Go Ithaca program about parking and transportation for construction workers working on 2 major projects on Green Street. TCAT has had several conversations with their representatives and they seem willing to work with us. It has been positive, but they are taking a while to ramp up and have a lot of people at once. There is not a regular influx of crews at specific times. Construction workers also want service that runs right at their start and end times. They want to get on and off the bus to punch in right on time and then the reverse in the evening.

It is challenging to have such precise timing, but TCAT is willing to make the effort. Matt has heard that if the service is not as convenient as possible, workers will just drive and park on the street. Julie pointed out that once this construction project is completed, there will be another crew come in for other projects. Matt said that this has been discussed. There is a certain sequence to events: structural, then plumbing, then electrical, etc. If TCAT had a very basic schedule in place, it is easier to add a backup bus when there is a temporary need rather than adding a trip to the schedule.

Denise suggested that the unions could offer incentives. In the same way that Cornell subsidizes the cost and gives bus passes to its staff, Unions might want to do the same. It might be a way to for them to negotiate with local governments when construction workers come in and take up valuable parking spots.

Vanessa has heard that there is a need to get local workers, who may not have personal vehicles or transportation, to job sites for start times as early as 6am. In addition to incentivize, there is also a need to figure out carpooling and how to get people to where they need to be.

Being on a number of committees, Denise frequently hears that union drivers are taking important parking spots away from the local businesses that are still open. For example, the 400 block of Collegetown is having trouble getting deliveries so getting people on the bus instead of taking up

those spots is important. If you incentivize it so that a new worker does not have to pay for a bus pass or parking, it is a win-win situation.

Matt added that the city reviews the site plans and they can put restrictions on parking for crew members. Even if the service were there, it seems like the preference is not to ride TCAT. The city could make it clear that parking needs to be figured out before construction ramps up. Matt and Scot have been in several of these meetings and are open to making it happen. It is difficult because crews won't ride unless the service is tailored to them but the construction folks aren't clear on when the workers will be coming in or what the shift time will be. They might start in a year or it could be 16 months from now and the shift time is dependent on other factors. Matt went on to say that if we put it in place and we make the service as close to the ask as possible, we really want it to work and have people riding and using the service. There doesn't seem to be much commitment on the part of the construction companies to push this. We need to look at this from different perspectives to figure out how to make behavior change and it's probably a combination of things.

Meeting Adjourned at 5:32 PM

Next meeting Nov. 8, 2021 at 4:30pm