What is Microtransit and How Can It Help Rural Mobility
Webinar Questions and Answers

November 18, 2020

Microtransit can mean many things: flexible transit, on-demand transportation, demand-responsive transit, mobility on-demand, app-enabled transportation service, and more. Participants learned about recent successful microtransit projects in rural areas that expand mobility options for their residents. This webinar featured microtransit best practices from panelists Rodger Lentz, Chief Planning and Development Officer for the City of Wilson, North Carolina and Olivia Blahut, Partnerships Lead at Via Transportation, who have launched a successful pilot program using app-enabled on-demand public transportation.

Access the webinar recording and presentation.

Q: Could we see an example of what this looks like on a device?

A: This was shown on the Where We Ended slide. On a device you would be able to input your location and destination. When a vehicle is dispatched, you can see the vehicle approaching on your screen. People are able to input information like if they are seniors or students and also able to input payment information as well as other things.

Q: What is Wilson’s productivity in terms of boardings per vehicle service hour? What percentage of vehicle time in Wilson is ride-time vs. waiting for a ride?

A: About 3.7-4 riders per hour. Not a lot of down-time. When it initially started, there was a home base for each vehicle and very rarely they have to go back to their home base because when they drop off one ride, another is ready to be picked up. They are never just driving around waiting to pick up riders.

Q: How frequently do buses run to Raleigh?
A: We don't offer bus service to Raleigh; there is Amtrak.

Q: Are you restricting ridesharing capacity in smaller minivan type vehicles in light of the pandemic? If so, how are you doing so? With COVID - how many riders are allowed in the van with social distancing? We currently only allow 2 on our buses that would be used in such a service as this.

A: We are currently restricting van capacity to 4 passengers. It is easily possible to increase or decrease that number as the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve. Via’s algorithm automatically limits capacity to 4 passengers - there is no manual work needed to do this.

Q: Did Wilson get a startup grant to start this program?

A: We did not receive a startup grant to initiate the program. We did receive a Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Accelerating Innovative Mobility (AIM) grant to expand it.

Q: Is there a phone line that riders can use or is this all done through the Via app?

A: Riders can book trips through the mobile application, phone number, or a web portal.

Q: What kind of marketing/comfort level differences do you see with fixed route (it will always be at locations x, y, and z) versus the more nebulous feel of microtransit?

A: All feedback is so positive, with a rating 4.9 out of 5. People are thrilled. Elected officials have said that their constituents are happy with the freedom they now have. It has changed people's lives.

To avoid potential confusion, riders can use the mobile application to track their vehicle as it approaches them in real time, receiving updated estimates on arrival times regularly. Drivers and riders can also communicate with each other in real time to help ensure they can find each other at the virtual bus stop.

Q: How have initial ridership levels compared to the former fixed-route service?

A: The service is averaging over 300 trips per day. The old weekday ridership was ~270 rides per day. Weekend ridership has more than doubled.

Q: Can you expand upon the definition of prepaid vouchers?

A: A prepaid voucher is a solution that allows riders who prefer cash to use the service without using a credit card or bank account. They exchange cash for a physical ticket, which then allows them to book a trip using the mobile application, web portal, or phone line.

Q: Are you finding riders with disabilities and older adults are using the service? And if yes, are they booking with the app or are they instead calling the Via call center to schedule their trip?
A: For the RIDE service overall, roughly 1 in 4 trips are booked via phone, the rest are booked through the app. 5% of all ridership thus far is for riders who are requesting a wheelchair-accessible vehicle. There is also a senior rider program that generates over 100 rides per month.

Q: Does Via own the vehicles?

A: Via provides access to vehicles through a third-party vehicle leasing partner.

Q: Does Via provide the people to answer the phones, or does the City of Wilson?

A: Via provides rider and driver support, both through a phone line and the mobile application.

Q: Are you using the Wilson system for court-ordered transport for substance use treatment and what unique considerations/adaptations are in place for that?

A: It is not being used for this purpose at this time.

Q: How do the rider demographics compare with the old fixed route system both in percentages and the of unduplicated minority users?

A: The system does not collect demographic data on its riders, so this is unknown. Wilson will be launching a survey in the coming months to better understand rider feedback on the services and glean more insights on how to expand and optimize the service.

Q: How long does it take for the rider to receive confirmation about their ride and where to go to get the ride?

A: Riders receive confirmation about their ride and virtual bus stop within just a few seconds of requesting a ride and accepting the trip proposal.

Q: How long do riders usually have to wait for the vehicle?

A: Wait time is averaging ~10-15 minutes.

Q: Is this program only for seniors and disabled persons or is it open to riders over 18. Minors under 18?

A: This is a general population service. Anyone over 14 years old can use the service unaccompanied by an adult. It is open to all residents of Wilson.

Q: What are the challenges, from a community-perspective, in having the manpower to get such a service going?

A: Via provides turnkey microtransit services to the City of Wilson. Via is responsible for providing the “manpower” to get the service up and running. The City team worked in close collaboration with the Via team to help with finalizing service design, community education, etc., but the launch process and on-going provision of services is handled by Via.
Q: It was mentioned the app has accessibility features built into it for hearing/visually impaired riders. Do you have examples of these features or specific programs used?

A: Examples of accessibility features include “TalkText” or “VoiceOver” capabilities to support low vision or blind riders. The app also uses high color contrast to reduce eye strain for color blind riders. Via can communicate with riders via phone, text, or in-app notifications to make it easy for riders with disabilities to receive timely information on their trip.

Q: How would microtransit handle peak demands such as students leaving school or arriving at school—vehicle capacity?

A: One of the key benefits of microtransit is that vehicle supply can be scaled up or down based on the level of demand. As the algorithm gathers more data about peak demand periods, more vehicles can proactively be put into service to accommodate (and removed when not needed).

Q: Do you use any transit buses on your system?

A: No, we use a fleet of Toyota Siennas and Chrysler Pacificas. (Note, National RTAP does not endorse or recommend any specific vehicles. This answer is included for informational purposes only.)

Q: What is the largest vehicle you use now with the Via System?

A: Please see above.

Q: Where is Ben Franklin Transit; which community?

A: Ben Franklin has headquarters in Franklin, Washington and serves the Tri-Cities area in Franklin and Benton counties. They provide service for Richland, Kennewick, and Pasco.

Q: What software is being used for this?

A: Via’s proprietary cloud-based dynamic vehicle routing and real-time passenger aggregation system is being used in this service.

Q: Norfolk, VA is huge, no?

A: Hampton Roads Transit in Norfolk, VA provides service in a 230-square-mile area including dense and lightly-populated areas.

Q: What is the "service area" for one vehicle?

A: Wilson’s city limits are roughly 30 square miles, and there are 10 vehicles in service at peak. This ratio of square miles per vehicle is not “set in stone” and can be adjusted based on quality of service expectations, fleet composition, and population density.

Q: Is the Opportunity Zone on I-40 within Wilson city limits and served?
A: The service covers all of Wilson City limits.

Q: Has the switch to microtransit impacted your NTD reporting? I am concerned about service data (miles, hours, etc.).

A: These metrics are available for the City of Wilson to use in their NTD reporting.

Q: Is there a vehicle that is wheelchair accessible that is recommended for the service?

A: We use vans that are easily retrofitted to be Wheelchair Accessible.

Q: What about broadband/connectivity problems that are commonplace in middle America? How does that work with your technology?

A: Riders without access to consistent internet may use the phone booking system to request rides. Furthermore, the driver application that powers the service can be used in “offline mode” which allows drivers to continue to receive driving directions even when service is unavailable.

Q: From an equity perspective, for some of these small systems, what about the impacts on low-income individuals that would be more likely to use a fixed transit system? What about those who are homeless?

A: In many cases, low-income individuals without access to a private vehicle or traditional public transit stops nearby to their place of residence are very positively impacted by the switch from fixed route to on-demand. On-demand public transit complements and extends the existing public transit infrastructure in a city, filling the gaps where it is needed most. By providing a corner-to-corner service, riders no longer have to walk to the nearest bus stop, and are no longer reliant on following a fixed route bus schedule.

Q: Do drivers receive one trip at a time, or do they get a digital log with several trips at a time?

A: One at a time. Our system is designed to efficiently assign on demand trips in real time to the van that is best suited to take that ride. Although drivers receive directions for one trip at a time, multiple passengers are aggregated into a shared vehicle.

Q: Are your costs lower with this service than it was as a fully fixed? What's the average cost per trip and average cost per service hours for the system?

A: With the same budget as the fixed route service, we have been able to serve more rides per day compared to our fixed route system - resulting in a lower cost per ride for the City. This ridership increase was possible even during the COVID-19 pandemic!

Q: How many vehicles did you need to purchase when you started?

A: Via makes 10 6-passenger minivans available for this service.

Q: What's the average wait time per customer?
Q: For the previous fixed-route service: did Wilson contract this service out, or was it owned and operated by the community?

A: This was owned and operated by the City.

Q: Did former operators/staff for the fixed route system receive support or encouragement to apply to work as Via drivers?

A: Some prior fixed line drivers are now independent contractors who provide Via trips.

Q: What is the difference on your fares from fixed route and microtransit?

A: No change in fare!

Q: What's the average number of miles per ride?

A: 2.5 miles

Q: Where can I look to get more information and research this?

A: Contact National RTAP at 888-589-6831, info@nationalrtap.org, or chat with us at http://www.nationalrtap.org (top right of the website) between 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM ET. Our resource center manager will prepare a targeted literature search to find resources that answer your questions. If there are enough requests for further research, we will publish links in the Hot Topics section of our Find Anything Toolkit.

Q: What size (sq. miles) is Wilson?

A: Wilson, NC is 31.98 square miles.

Q: Will the PowerPoint be shared with attendees?

A: Yes, it is available here.