

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE

Inter-office Communication

DATE: 6/24/2026

TO: Marcelia Nicholson-Bovell, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Joe Lamers, Director, Department of Transportation
Steve Fuentes, Chief Executive Officer, Milwaukee County Transit System

SUBJECT: From the Director, Department of Transportation and the President & Chief Executive Officer, Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS), providing information responsive to 2026 Budget Amendment 20 (Transit Plus Paratransit Program).

FILE TYPE: Reference File Report

POLICY

2026 Budget Amendment #20: While Milwaukee County remains committed to delivering high-quality service, concerns have been raised that paratransit van service has not consistently met expectations. MCTS, in collaboration with the Department of Transportation, and with input from paratransit riders and from advocacy organizations, shall evaluate current operations and recommend strategies to improve the rider experience, focusing on reliability, accessibility, timeliness, and overall customer satisfaction. A report with findings and proposed solutions shall be presented to the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors by the July 2026 meeting cycle.

BACKGROUND

Paratransit Program Overview:

The Transit Plus paratransit program is a federally mandated shared-ride program designed to provide service to people with disabilities who are prevented from using the fixed-route buses for some or all their trips due to their disability. While the program fully complies with all federal ADA requirements, it has also long exceeded those standards by providing broader access, better affordability, and service above and beyond basic federal requirements to riders with disabilities.

Paratransit service is designed to mimic the service provided by MCTS buses. Service operates the same hours and days of the week as fixed-route service, and trip duration is designed to be comparable to that of the same trip taken on a fixed-route bus. Notably, this service is more than federally required by providing border-to-border paratransit coverage within the County, beyond the required $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile radius around all fixed-route bus routes.

Paratransit service delivers a higher level of personal assistance than required. Instead of the federal minimum curb-to-curb service, riders are provided with door-to-door service, meaning drivers meet riders at the first exterior door at pickup and accompany them to the first exterior door at drop-off. Riders who require custodial care or have specialized medical needs may require more support than Transit Plus can provide.

The current Transit Plus fare of \$4 remains compliant with federal ADA regulations, and below what federal guidelines allow MCTS to charge, which cap paratransit fares at no more than twice the fixed-route fare, which would amount to \$5.50 per ride as allowed by ADA guidelines.

Rides are provided on a pre-scheduled basis, with riders able to schedule their trips from 1 day to 1 week prior to travel. Riders can specify either a requested pick-up time or a requested drop-off time, but not both. Per federal law, pickup times may be negotiated by the provider up to 1 hour before or after the requested time. Once the pick-up time has been established, the van is considered on time if it arrives within a 30-minute window measured from the pick-up time until 30 minutes after the pick-up time. Rides on paratransit service cannot be prioritized by trip purpose. Under federal law, a trip to the store must be treated with equal importance as a trip to work or to the doctor.

Paratransit van service is provided through a contract with First Transit (a wholly owned subsidiary of Transdev North America). MCTS pays a negotiated rate per service hour provided. The current van service contract began in October 2023 and ends in October 2030. Under this contract, the vendor is responsible for all aspects of service provision. This includes accepting ride reservations, scheduling and dispatching rides, providing and maintaining vehicles and scheduling software, and hiring, training, and managing drivers. The contract includes Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for on-time performance, ride duration, service availability, appointment drop-offs, complaints, and service productivity. Incentives and liquidated damages are applied as warranted.

Transit Plus also provides an additional discretionary, non-mandated Same Day Ride Pilot that is currently operated under contract with Via Transportation, Inc. This report focuses on core paratransit service, therefore does not address the Same Day Ride Pilot set to conclude later this year.

Public Input

In response to Amendment 20, Transit Plus solicited rider feedback to inform steps that could be taken to improve timeliness, reliability, accessibility, and overall customer satisfaction with the program. A series of public meetings was scheduled at various locations, on different days and times, to provide riders and advocates with the opportunity to give feedback in person. These round-table-type events allowed riders to express their opinions while MCTS staff served as facilitators and notetakers, documenting customer input. In addition, an online option was available to those unable to attend an in-person event. Information about the public meetings and feedback opportunities was posted on the vans, shared among multiple local advocacy groups, and through County entities such as the Office for Persons with Disabilities and Commission for Persons with Disabilities. In total, approximately 30 people attended the in-person events while an additional 14 responses were received online.

The responses received from these outreach efforts largely reinforced the feedback received from our 2025 paratransit customer satisfaction survey. That survey received over 250 responses from riders, caregivers, and advocates. The combined total of feedback responses across both outreach efforts is approximately 10% of our active riders.

In addition, more than 780 Transit Plus riders use the My Transit Manager app to monitor their trips. This app also allows riders to rate each trip on a scale of 1-5 and leave a comment. The feedback received via My Transit Manager is overwhelmingly positive, with a rating of 4 or 5. Only rides that receive negative feedback are entered into our customer feedback database for investigation and follow-up, as needed, to improve the program.

Transit Plus provided 285,296 rides from July 2025 to March 2026. During that same period, Transit Plus received 650 complaints and 80 commendations for exemplary service. This translates to 23 complaints per 10,000 trips. The four highest categories of complaints were On-time pick-ups (191), Late appointment drop-off (93), Ride Duration (91), and Safety (55).

Key Takeaways:

In general, most riders are satisfied with the service provided by Transit Plus. However, opportunities for improvement do exist. These areas fall into two general categories:

Improved scheduling, routing, and on-time performance:

- Riders are looking for more efficient scheduling and routing of their rides
- Riders want more timely pick-ups and appointment drop-offs
- Riders want improved communication on the status of their rides
- Riders want a way to schedule and manage their rides without having to call Transdev
- Riders want drivers to know where they are going and have up-to-date GPS to identify the most direct routes.

Improved rider experience:

- Riders want staff who are more customer-friendly and knowledgeable about working with riders who have disabilities.
- Riders want to be able to connect with staff who are polite and can answer their questions on the phone.
- Riders would like a reduction in AM/FM radio noise, 2-way radio chatter, and to hear staff using a more professional tone on the radio.
- Riders want drivers to consistently and safely provide door-to-door service.
- Riders want drivers who read and follow notes regarding specific pick-up or drop-off instructions.
- Riders have experienced that drivers are unhappy when trips are added to a route, causing the driver's workday to be extended. (Contract allows Transdev to hold over drivers for up to one hour beyond shift end time, if needed.) Unhappy drivers lead to poor customer service and higher turnover.

Recommendations:

- Implement an updated contract with Transdev with a requirement to procure new scheduling software and increased liquidated damages for failure to meet Key Performance Indicators. This amendment was signed in May of 2026 and provides MCTS with more leverage to support good service.
- Implement updated scheduling software. This recommendation is key to providing the improved service and customer experience that our riders are asking for. To this end, MCTS has partnered with Transdev to provide new scheduling software through Spare Labs. Spare's platform will provide:
 - Multiple communication options for riders include IVR (Interactive Voice Response) messaging, SMS (Short Message Service) texts, in-app notifications and emails.
 - A rider app that will allow for booking and canceling rides as well as live monitoring of vehicle location.
 - An AI agent that can be used to check on, book and cancel rides.
 - A dynamic scheduling algorithm that continuously optimizes trips to limit manual placement of rides and maximize on-time performance and program efficiency.
 - Pop-up information for drivers to alert them of specialized instructions.
 - Google Maps to make sure routing is efficient and provides live traffic information to drivers.
 - Automatic rescheduling of trips to limit the manual placement of rides when in-service issues such as driver call-offs or vehicle delays occur. This reduces the volume of problematic last-minute add-on rides.

- Operations staff will play key roles in software implementation to address the roadblocks they experience with the current software and increase ownership of the new processes.
- An opportunity to potentially offer a limited number of same day rides on paratransit service provided by Transdev as we prepare to sunset the current Same Day Ride Pilot at the end of 2026.

Kickoff for this project was held on June 4th, with go-live scheduled for the end of Q3 and full operations implementation complete by the end of 2026.

- Execute a wide range of Customer Experience improvement initiatives.
 - Radio/Telephone Improvements:
 - Reduced radio transmissions and improved radio etiquette. New Spare software will limit the number of radio calls dispatchers make to place rides on routes. Staff will be retrained in professional radio etiquette, and performance on this metric will be enforced in accordance with Transdev discipline policies.
 - The Transdev dispatch team will be retrained to use the online radio system instead of handheld radios to communicate with vehicles. This will reduce the amount of background noise from the dispatch office that is heard on the vans.
 - The newest vans put into service do not have AM/FM radios. Drivers who do have radio access are reminded to keep the volume low and avoid topics that could be problematic for riders. (Ex. politics, religion, etc.). Moving forward, Transdev plans to order all vehicles purchased for service without AM/FM radios.
 - Refine the use of scripts and provide phone etiquette training for all call takers.
 - Test and update Transdev and Transit Plus phone systems to ensure calls are being routed appropriately and minimize call center background noise.
 - Service to Riders with Disabilities:
 - New customer feedback database (July 2025) has streamlined complaint management and decreased response time from a period of weeks to the contracted 72-hour response window. It also allows for a follow-up email to the customer once the complaint investigation is complete.
 - Transit Plus staff have reviewed Transdev's ADA customer service curriculum to ensure it covers key service requirements.
 - ADA refresher topics are addressed during monthly Safety Meetings, and a wheelchair securement practice platform is available in the driver break room.
 - Reinstate the process of inviting a Transit Plus client to speak to new drivers on the topic of working with customers who have disabilities and the importance of the service they provide.
 - Increase the number of unannounced "spot checks" during client pick-ups and drop-offs to reinforce proper client escort and mobility device securement procedures.
 - Propose incorporating two (2) seats for non-rider, non-caregiver advocates on the Transit Plus Advisory Council (TPAC).
 - Safety Initiatives:
 - Transdev corporate monthly Safety Meeting agendas are supplemented with topics based on observed local trends.

- The Transdev Safety Solutions Team meets monthly to address staff safety concerns.
 - Transit Plus staff attend these meetings periodically and regularly review the minutes to identify areas for improvement.
 - Transdev is currently working on an updated safety recognition program to positively reinforce team members who exhibit safe work habits.
- Cultivate a positive workplace culture for Transdev employees, which in turn will result in decreased turnover and more positive customer interactions.
 - Remodel Transdev offices for a clean, updated workplace for their employees. (Construction started 4/23/2026)
 - Ongoing TPAC recognition program that recognizes vendor staff who go “above and beyond” on a quarterly basis. Award recipients receive a certificate, a pen, and a TPAC pin to wear on their uniform, signifying their accomplishments.
 - Employee engagement initiatives recently undertaken by Transdev include:
 - Distinguished Driver Program- Recognizes drivers who meet monthly performance criteria. At the end of the year, one driver is chosen as the driver of the year and recognized with an award. Blue uniform shirts are worn by distinguished drivers.
 - Employee of the Month- recognized for going above and beyond in service to clients.
 - Positive driver feedback ratings and comments that are submitted via the My Transit Manager app are posted in a central location in the Transdev office.
 - Weekly Message Program- one customer service/safety message is shared with employees each week. Random staff are asked about the message, and if they can answer the question, they are entered into a drawing for a small prize (e.g., a \$20 gift card).
- Strengthen the connection between the Transit Plus and Transdev teams to further support a culture of customer focus and underscore the vital nature of our service.
 - Transit Plus staff increase presence at the Transdev office beyond current site visit evaluations.
 - New Transdev drivers will visit the Transit Plus office to meet staff and understand their roles.
 - Encourage Transit Plus staff to experience taking rides on the service.
 - Explore the option of a Transit Plus/ Transdev staff appreciation event.

By implementing the above recommendations, the Transit Plus and Transdev teams will work collaboratively to reduce complaints and improve service for our riders. In 2027, Transit Plus will again conduct a customer satisfaction survey to measure our success and further focus our ongoing efforts on improvement.

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns with the strategic plan:

- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity.
- 2B: Break down silos across County government to maximize access to and quality of services offered.
- 3A: Invest “upstream” to address root causes of health disparities.
- 3B: Enhance the County’s fiscal health and sustainability.

3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities.

RECOMMENDATION

This report is provided for informational purposes.

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

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cc: Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Manager, Office of the County Clerk