

## **County of Milwaukee**

### **Interoffice Communication**

**DATE:** June 25, 2021

**TO:** Supervisor Marcelia Nicholson, Chair, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Department of Transportation

**SUBJECT:** MCTS 2021 Extra/Special Event Service Challenges Report

#### **BACKGROUND**

In 2020, summer festivals and special events were canceled due to the COVID-19 disease pandemic. In 2021, several festivals and events were also canceled due to the lingering effects of the pandemic. Meanwhile, the introduction of vaccinations against COVID-19 and reductions in community spread of the disease resulted in growth and enthusiasm for a return to normalcy, which at times was met with other unforeseen impacts of the pandemic's disruptive nature. For example, new challenges associated with workforce issues. The need for businesses to hire and train new employees began to hit local and national employers hard. Milwaukee County and the Milwaukee County Transit system (MCTS) also fell victim to this changing labor situation.

While MCTS watched other local special events get canceled, largely due to workforce issues, such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July Fireworks, and Lakefront Air and Water Show, its own Operations Personnel were carefully considering all aspects of the challenges of serving Summerfest in 2021. Ultimately, it was concluded that Summerfest could not be served in 2021 due to a perfect storm of challenges.

#### **Challenges to Serving Summerfest**

The decision to move Summerfest from the summer months to the month of September created an initial concern, that was hard for MCTS to reconcile. For 50 years, Summerfest was held in the summer when the amount of weekday transit service is at a low for the year. Buses were available to be used for Summerfest because schools and universities were not in session, leaving a surplus of vehicles that could be deployed on weekday afternoons when they would have otherwise been engaged in the service of education focused trips.

In the 2020 transit budget, some school-based services were eliminated as a cost savings measure. This action was necessary to balance the budget in the face of unsustainable state support. Said another way, the lack of dedicated funding for transit coupled with stagnant funding sources that are not at all indexed to inflation is finally catching up to us. Since the last time we did Summerfest in 2019, the fleet size overall has shrunk from 393 buses to 358. This change alone, results in fewer buses, not just for weekday afternoons, but also for the end of the night, when anywhere from 90 buses to 120 buses need to be ready to go as the festival closes. The notion of keeping some old buses around just for use at a festival once each year was considered, but the high cost cannot be justified when every dollar counts, and such action does not address the bigger issue currently experienced, a lack of sufficient numbers of bus operators.

Despite nearly non-stop hiring and training of new bus operators in the past 12 months, our bus operator count has declined to a five-year low; we went from 772 to 714. A lower count of bus operators erodes our ability to entice enough drivers to accept Summerfest assignments, even when overtime pay is offered. In addition, our ability to safely manage heavy crowds of people taking buses to and from the festival is dependent upon assistance from our transit security contractor, who is also having difficulty with hiring and training of new recruits.

#### **Looking to the Future**

MCTS staff are dedicated to serving our community from early in the morning, to early the next morning, nearly 24 hours each day, 365 days out of the year. We have been partners with Summerfest for 50 years and enjoyed the challenge of successfully providing services to the large crowds that attend Summerfest. Under the current situation, we have offered our expertise to Summerfest as a means of helping to find transportation solutions that work. As extra/special transit services directly to Summerfest are not possible, a shift to increased use of existing public transportation services in downtown Milwaukee makes sense:

- MCTS has six (6) bus routes in the vicinity of Maier Festival Park:
  - Greenline (Water & Chicago),
  - Goldline (to Cass),
  - Rt 14 (Wis & Cass—comes from N&S),
  - Rt 15 (Water & Chicago, comes from N&S),
  - Rt 30 (VanBuren & WI, serv east side and near westside),
  - Rt 33 (Juneau Park, to/from Vliet & S84th)
  
- A challenge for MCTS is to maximize the availability of these local services for festival goers while mitigating any impacts of the festival on existing MCTS passengers that are just trying to get home in the evening after working a long day, or 2nd- shift job.
  
- In addition, new services, such as the Streetcar and East-West Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line that will stop at a station in the Couture Development at the lakefront will also be highly utilized in the future.

As MCTS began to realize that serving Summerfest was a non-starter this year, efforts were made to discuss this issue with the Administration, and ultimately also the Chairwoman of the Board. This report provides a necessary public forum to assess the challenges of the situation more closely. Other important considerations for the Administration, County Board and MCTS include Racial Equity and whether the approach of focusing on regular local MCTS transit routes in lieu of extra or special event services has merit. In many respects, this issue is one and the same as explained below.

### **Equity Considerations**

A report to the Board in June under File No. 21-32 that addressed the suspension of MCTS freeway flyer service from park-and-ride lots during the pandemic is relevant to this issue. Park-and-ride lot services are akin to the extra/special event services provided directly to Summerfest. When MCTS evaluated equity aspects of the suspension of freeway flyer service it was shown to not have a disparate impact on minority populations nor a disproportionate burden on the low-income population in our community. Meaning that the provision of park-and-ride lot services has value to the community but does not help the County to achieve racial equity (as much as support for local transit services). As such, a continued focus on achieving good access to festivals via local MCTS routes, as well as allocating resources as possible, to minimize and mitigate the negative impacts of a large festival on the everyday users of our transit network is more in keeping with objectives to intentionally improve matters of equity in our community.

Another question about equity involved the notion of equal treatment for other special events at Maier Festival Grounds, and at State Fair Park. MCTS will also focus on local routes when it comes to Ethnic Festivals downtown, and the State Fair, rather than further risk continuity of MCTS's regularly scheduled services. MCTS's commitment to service excellence includes safety and reliability of service to meet every schedule that is printed. Boosting bus operator counts will continue as a priority for MCTS until workforce issues are no longer a factor in decisions regarding transit services.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

This report is for informational purposes unless otherwise directed.

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