

## County of Milwaukee Interoffice Communication

**DATE:** 4/17/2020  
**TO:** Theodore Lipscomb, Sr., Chairman, County Board of Supervisors  
**FROM:** Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Department of Transportation  
**SUBJECT:** MCTS COVID-19 Response Report

### BACKGROUND

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) subsequently turned to its Critical Incident Management Plan (CIMP), Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP), and Pandemic Plan as a source of guidance in a response to the COVID-19 state of emergency. None of these plans predicted the degree to which this situation would be changing from week to week.

In real-time MCTS crafted a response that was collaborative, comprehensive, dynamic and flexible as necessary to respond to challenges presented by day-to-day changes in emergency orders issued by State/Local governments, as well as periodic updates and modifications to recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

To keep passengers safe and employees healthy we took a multifaceted approach to buying supplies and increasing cleaning and disinfecting of the inside of buses and MCTS facilities. We also communicated regularly with the public and employees through press releases, social media, in-house posters, bulletins, Ridemcts.com website updates, etc. In addition, MCTS coordinated activities with the County Executive's Office, Milwaukee County Office of Emergency Management (OEM), Milwaukee County Emergency Operations Center (EOC), and the county-wide Unified Emergency Operations Center (UEOC) established in response to the pandemic.

Throughout the challenges of the pandemic, public transportation has been considered critical transportation infrastructure by the Governor's Office, and U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). This report conveys how MCTS responded to the pandemic over a period of five (5) weeks leading up to the deadline for this report.

### Week of March 8<sup>th</sup>

- World Health Organization (WHO) declared novel coronavirus (COVID-19) a pandemic.
- Universities, colleges and school districts announced extended spring breaks to provide for additional time to develop online classes for students.
- Governor Evers declared a public health emergency due to COVID-19 (e.g. state of emergency).
- Governor Evers directed the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) to mandate statewide closure of all K-12 Wisconsin Schools.
- County Executive announced new administrative orders regarding supplemental paid leave and travel related quarantine.
- Milwaukee County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was activated.

*MCTS increased purchasing activities around cleaning supplies and prepared to shutdown UBUSes for the rest of the semester.*

*MCTS contemplated paid leave and travel restrictions in step with Milwaukee County.*

*Audio messages were prepared for the onboard announcement system – in English and Spanish language – to emphasize CDC recommendations for public transit travel; messages were loaded onto each vehicle and ready to play by Monday, 3/16/2020.*

#### Week of March 15<sup>th</sup>

- Governor Evers prohibited mass gatherings of 50 people or more (early in the week).
- Unified Emergency Operations Center (UEOC) was created.
- Governor Evers directed the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) to limit gatherings to less than 10 to slow the spread of COVID-19.
- Ridership gradually declined by 60 to 70% over pre-pandemic conditions, as many employers moved to tele-work.

*Operations staff assessed how to reduce service in response to lower demand and lost revenue.*

*A letter was sent to all employees expressing concern for employee safety and outlining steps being taken to protect bus operators, and the public, and limit the spread of the virus. MCTS also released notification to all employees about the availability of the employee assistance program (EAP).*

*A press release was issued by MCTS requesting that riders limit non-essential bus travel. A press release announcing the closure of the Administration Building to the public was also released.*

*MCTS released a letter to all employees regarding a bus operator that tested positive. MCTS cooperated fully with all information needs of the Milwaukee Health Department, especially as it pertained to identifying any shared workspaces of patients confirmed to be positive for the virus.*

*An end-of-the week press release, and press conference announced the elimination of Freeway flyers and a reduction in service to Saturday-like schedules effective Monday, 3/23/2020. Transit Planners worked to support the new reduced service schedule with real-time information.*

#### Week of March 22<sup>nd</sup>

- Saturday schedule began as the new weekday schedule and real-time information worked.
- 240 of 730 bus operators were on leave. About 170 (23%) were unavailable due to illness, childcare or high risk for complications of COVID-19.
- County Board supervisors petitioned for free fares and rear-door boarding.
- MCTS was asked to prepare budget projections for cases in which the current state continues for consideration by the Milwaukee County Budget Director.
- Governor's 'safer at home' order went into effect on March 25<sup>th</sup>. Public transit was exempt other than stating: **"individuals riding on public transit must comply with Social Distancing Requirements to the greatest extent possible."** Non-essential businesses are closed.
- Reports that there may be a federal program with \$25B for transit circulated. CARES Act passed.

*MCTS provided a memo about the pros and cons of free fares and rear-door boarding to the County Board of Supervisors for consideration.*

*MCTS issued a press release on March 26<sup>th</sup> informing the public that it will implement free fares and backdoor boarding beginning on March 28<sup>th</sup> to provide for a social distancing between passengers and bus operators.*

#### Week of March 29<sup>th</sup>

- Models predicted Wisconsin peak on April 26<sup>th</sup>, two weeks after national peak of April 15<sup>th</sup>
- Milwaukee County issued directives: Hiring Freeze and Personnel Action Freeze; Overtime Freeze; Non-Essential Contract Freeze; Work Travel, Training, and Professional Development freeze; Operating Capital Budget accounts freeze; Operating Commodity/Services Purchases prioritization; Capital Cash Projects Review for consideration of delays and cancellations.
- April 1<sup>st</sup> government checks for disability and other safety net programs induced ridership to grocery stores, pharmacies, etc. Wheel-chair boarding activities doubled from previous week.
- Some ethnic festivals were canceled. Summerfest moved to September. DNC moved to August.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for workplace preparedness and protection were posted by FTA.
- At the end of the week, CDC changed its guidance for the public about the use of masks and recommended everyone voluntarily wear a cloth face mask when out in public.

*MCTS added service to BlueLine, RedLine, PurpleLine and Route 80 beginning Friday, 4/3/2020 to respond to concerns that passengers are not social distancing due to overcrowding on some buses. Passengers were encouraged to 'self-select' off of a bus if there is not ample space onboard per the Governor's Order – "individuals riding on public transit must comply with social distancing requirements to the greatest extent possible."*

*MCTS ensured that its preparedness and protection response is consistent with current CDC recommendations for the transit workplace as posted by FTA. In anticipation of CDC revising its recommendation about using masks in public, MCTS orders bandanas for all bus operators to be used as a face covering. Finally, near week's end, MCTS and ATU issue a joint letter to CDC inquiring about PPE for bus operators.*

#### Week of April 5<sup>th</sup>

- April 7<sup>th</sup> election was focus at start of this week. Election generated transit trips.
- Passengers expressed concerns about too many people on each bus to allow for social distancing but continued to remain on board.
- CDC issued guidance on What Bus Transit Operators Need to Know About COVID-19 and What Transit Maintenance Workers Need to Know About COVID-19.

*It is possible that new guidance for transit workers expressed by the CDC was a result of the joint letter submitted by MCTS and ATU to the CDC only days before. Upon review of new guidance for transit, MCTS determined that it continued to be in compliance.*

*A limit of 10 passengers per bus was set in motion as a replacement for passengers 'self selecting' off of crowded buses. Press releases, signs, etc., were used to communicate this change.*

*MCTS continued to actively add back as much service as possible given limitations of workforce availability. By the end-of-the week, MCTS added signage to all buses emphasizing the CDC recommendation for masks when in public, including when on public transit.*

## **Summary**

Previous efforts in the areas of emergency planning and preparedness initially guided MCTS in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent state of emergency; however, none of the plans prepared MCTS for the degree to which this situation would be changing from day-to-day and from week-to-week.

MCTS strived to respond to each change in a manner that was consistent with the latest emergency order, and recommendation of the CDC while taking steps to communicate with passengers and employees about the seriousness of the pandemic. Through many of the earliest weeks of the pandemic, some in the public were slow to adopt the protections recommended by the CDC. The lack of adherence to the 'safer at home' order and CDC recommendations for the public, coupled with concern for the safety of passengers and employees produced a period of strong concern and emotion for many.

Never in our lives have we seen such a pandemic and the societal stress and anxiety that accompanied it. Cooperation, collaboration and sticking together has never been more critical. Businesses and community stakeholders expressed the critical need for transit in letters, and offers of support such as donations of Coca-Cola products by a local distributor, donations of home-made and commercial grade masks, donations of coffee, etc. Many signs of appreciation for the dedication and commitment of MCTS in general and bus operators were expressed.

It is cooperation that makes us stronger in a time of crisis. It is cooperation that will make us stronger in the future, as the pandemic ends, and MCTS returns to the normalcy of being the reliable and consistent transit operation that this community demands and deserves.

## RECOMMENDATION

This report is for informational purposes unless otherwise directed.

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