



PARATRANSIT TAXI TASK FORCE

MINUTES

Date: Thursday, June 15, 2023
Time: 9:30am – 11:00am
Location: Independence First
540 S. 1st Street
Milwaukee WI 53204
Virtual: Zoom Meeting ID: 939 7452 4145
<https://zoom.us/j/93974524145>

Attendees:

Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Milwaukee County Department of Transportation
Danita Jackson, Disability Rights Wisconsin
Jim Kerlin, President & CEO, Beyond Vision
Cheryl Orgas, Executive Director, Audio and Braille Literacy Enhancement
Kevin Meyers
Emily Bryant, Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Joan Schneider, Center for Deaf-Blind Persons
Rob Buettner, Beyond Vision
Cindy Bentley, Executive Director, People First Wisconsin
Jennifer Wenzel, Beyond Vision
Kevin Fortune, Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Don Natzke, Emeritus, Milwaukee County and Transit Plus
Mike Bonk, Director, Office of Persons with Disabilities, DHHS
Rebecca Rabatin, Independence First
Ben McKay, Interim Executive Director, SEWRPC
Jennifer Sarnecki, SEWRPC
Brian Peters, Assistant Program Director, Independence First
Barbara Beckert, Director of External Advocacy, Disability Rights Wisconsin
Julie Esch, Deputy Director, Milwaukee County Department of Transportation
Paul Sanfelippo, United Transportation Group
Lisa Walters, Paratransit Customer Service Coordinator
Alena DeGrado, Transportation Coordinator, DHHS
Sandy Kellner, Administrative Officer, MCTS
Fran Musci, Director of Transit Plus, MCTS
Daniel Idzikowski, Aging Unit Director, DHHS
Mark Tillman, Executive Assistant, MCDOT

Ben McKay moves to approve the Minutes from the meeting on April 3, 2023

Barbara Beckert expressed concern about the accessibility issues during the last meeting. Many participants on Zoom were muted and faced difficulties in actively participating. Barbara recalls that there was an agreement to hold a coaching session before this meeting to address accessibility concerns and establish ground rules. However, these actions were not carried out, and she believes they should be included in the meeting Minutes. Some attendees had trouble with the previous meeting, and she wants this information reflected in the Minutes as well.

Kevin Meyers raised a concern regarding the accessibility of meeting minutes for individuals with visual impairments. He mentioned that if the minutes are displayed on the screen during the meeting, visually impaired attendees cannot access them. Kevin suggests that in the future, the minutes, along with the agenda, should be sent out ahead of time to allow ample opportunity for all participants, including those with visual impairments, to review and approve them properly.

It was discussed that modifications would be made to the Minutes from the first meeting. The revised Minutes for meeting #1 would be sent in advance of meeting #3. Additionally, the meeting minutes from meeting #2 would also be sent in accessible formats ahead of time. The approval of the Minutes would be postponed until members had a chance to review them properly.

There was acknowledgment that the inclusivity efforts in the previous meeting fell short, and the aim was to improve by sending the necessary materials ahead of time for the next meetings. The discussion also covered the need for a logistics meeting to address accessibility concerns and offer assistance to participants, both online and in person. While there were some improvements observed in the current meeting, it was noted that there might still be some challenges to address.

Dan Idzikowski acknowledged there are concerns about using the Teams platform at Milwaukee County, which is not very accessible. The county has transitioned from Teams to Zoom for the Paratransit Task Force meetings, face challenges as the county's tech support does not provide assistance for Zoom. Holding a meeting to help others learn to use Zoom might be challenging due to the lack of expertise within the county. It is proposed to explore the possibility of Independence First, or another organization, having a training group or resources to assist with Zoom training, which could be a valuable solution to address the issue.

Before proceeding to the PowerPoint presentation, there is a request to ensure that all materials are presented in plain language. The concern is that some of the content may not be in plain language, which is important for better understanding and inclusivity. The speaker appreciates the effort in working on plain language and urges the board to incorporate it in their materials.

PowerPoint Presentation

- Presented by Dan Idzikowski and Alena Degrado from Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services.

DHHS Alternatives Analysis Summary

Task Force 1 Recap

- At the first Paratransit Taxi Task Force meeting, a brief overview of the current system was provided, along with the federal requirements requiring system change, including full compliance with ADA public accessibility.
- We heard that paratransit taxi users chose to use the taxi service instead of the mandated paratransit van service because they believed the taxi service to be more timely, convenient, reliable, and flexible.
- Specific characteristics desired included: private rides, ability to travel throughout and outside of the county, ability for PCA's to accompany at no charge, door-to-door service, ability to make stops along the way, multiple ways to schedule (including appointment-based) and pay for rides, and driver training.

Analysis

Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reviewed the existing paratransit taxi service and modeled several alternative on demand transportation services in effort to satisfy the desired program characteristics outlined above and provide such service equitably to all eligible riders. The cost analysis ultimately included two models for the proposed on-demand service available to both ambulatory and non-ambulatory riders. None of the models proposed would continue the paratransit taxi service in its current form.

- The cost per ride was based off estimates for prioritizing private rides and ridership was based off riders currently qualifying for Transit Plus.
- **Proposed On Demand Model 1** estimates higher ridership using Transit Plus data from March 2023. There were 2176 unique riders, 69% of which are ambulatory and 31% of which are non-ambulatory. This estimate assumes all of these riders would use the on-demand service in a given month.
- **Proposed On Demand Model 2** estimates lower ridership by applying the proportion of ambulatory riders that currently use the taxi (18%) to non-ambulatory riders enrolled in Transit Plus, that would be able to use a wheelchair accessible vehicle, totaling 1101 riders in a given month.

Results – Changes to On Demand Service

- The differences in proposed and current on-demand services reflect both service enhancements and limitations due to budget constraints.

- Service enhancements include the provision of wheelchair accessible vehicles and service beyond the county border.
- Budget constraints would place limitations on service hours and the number of monthly rides (two rides per month), would increase the fare (\$10, up from \$4) and jeopardize the service's private ride model.
- Other enhancements are also not feasible, such as door-to-door service, an ability to make stops along the way, private rides, appointment-based scheduling, and multiple platforms to schedule and pay for rides. The incorporation of these additional characteristics would further raise total cost.
- Given the increased costs associated with wheelchair accessible service, the total cost estimates for Models 1 and 2 are \$1,170,240 and \$589,680, which are 3.7x and 1.9x higher than the current annual cost of the service, respectively.

Recommendations

Milwaukee County DOT and DHHS are recommending discontinuing the provision of the paratransit taxi service after the expiration of the contract (September 28, 2023) for the following reasons:

- The total annual cost of the service, after inclusion of wheelchair accessible vehicles, is projected to exceed budgeted tax levy funds available for use.
- Within the budgetary confines, any proposed on-demand service would not meet the preferences of the riders, especially in terms of limiting monthly rides, increasing the fare and not guaranteeing private rides.
- The provision of an on-demand service may detract riders away from other available transit services, including fixed route transit and mandated paratransit.
- Discontinuing the paratransit taxi service in its current form is not only mandated by the FTA, but also increases equity for all paratransit riders.

In lieu of creating a new program, we recommend exploring ways to promote existing transportation services (fixed route buses, Transit Plus vans and OATS vans) and continuing to advocate for increases in specialized transportation funds, which can be used to improve efficiency, response time, and level of service. In addition, we recommend exploring the use of any remaining 2023 taxi funds to provide services for paratransit riders. This may include travel training, and/or promotional Transit Plus van or fixed route bus rides through the end of 2023.

Discussion

During the discussion, it was mentioned that a customer satisfaction survey for paratransit services is currently underway, closing on Friday. The survey aims to gather information on riders' destinations, purposes, frustrations, and suggestions for improvement. The aging unit also conducted a transportation needs survey last July 2022, primarily targeting older adults, and received valuable feedback on the need to go beyond county borders.

Regarding the paratransit survey, it is available in various formats, including online links, paper copies for screen readers, and PDFs upon request. The organizers have made efforts to notify paratransit users through website postings, emails, postcards, and social media. One participant requested to receive the survey link via email.

There are concerns about the van service and the multiple issues it faces, leading some individuals to rely on the same-day service taxi due to van service problems. Delays of 2 1/2 hours or more in getting home after work or waiting for an hour and a half have resulted in missed work meetings, student meetings, and doctor appointments that must be rescheduled months in advance. The question is raised to Brian and the group about the likelihood of improvements in the van services as a viable alternative, considering that the current two-rides-per-month limit for the taxi service poses a significant hardship for many users.

Improvements made to the newest paratransit service contract, effective from November 1st. Traditionally, paratransit services had a pickup window, causing delays and inconvenience. The new contract addresses concerns raised by riders and includes key performance indicators to ensure timely drop-offs at appointments. Technology advancements will help in comparing paratransit trip durations to fixed-route bus trips to maintain comparable travel times. The contract also allows for flexibility in meeting appointment times and reduces the number of passengers per van hour to improve service quality. Additionally, an Integrated Voice Response (IVR) program may be implemented to provide automated reminder calls and other amenities for riders' convenience. These enhancements are aimed at offering a much better paratransit service experience and reducing the need for a taxi-type program.

Paul Sanfelippo highlighted the importance of considering taxi rates in the City of Milwaukee, which have not been adjusted for almost 20 years. They are working with the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics to build a case for sustainable rates. The current rates are not realistic and present challenges for continuing taxi services, despite the desire to support the county and its constituents. He also expressed hope that as the RFP (Request for Proposal) is crafted, it will consider the positive developments happening in Milwaukee and support local businesses and individuals. He emphasized the value of keeping some of the work local and not solely relying on out-of-state resources, as it can be challenging for transportation companies to survive in the current industry climate.

Barbara Beckert discussed the state budget announcement, which did not include the expected significant increase for paratransit and specialized transportation services, except for an 11% increase in the Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Specialized Assistance Program. The impact of this budget on Milwaukee County's needs is still being assessed. There is concern about moving transit into the General Fund, an issue that she and others have opposed for years. She expressed disappointment and frustration with the lack of progress despite encouraging conversations with legislators. She emphasizes that the fight for better funding and support for transit services is not over, and they are meeting with other advocates to explore potential solutions and hope for action from the governor's veto authority.

Adjournment