

RTAP Peer Roundtable Notes

Solutions to Vehicle Shortage

12/14/22, 10–11:30am

Participants

1. Randy Jahnke, Wadena County / Friendly Rider
2. Arlene Mathison, University of Minnesota Center for Transportation Studies
3. Jeremy Monahan, Faribault-Martin Co. Transit Board / Prairie Lakes Transit
4. Kayla Sullivan, Productive Alternatives, Inc. / Transit Alternatives
5. Paul Coyour, Prairie Five CAC, Inc. / Prairie Five RIDES
6. Torey Hunkus, MnDOT
7. Tina Neary, MnDOT
8. Ryan Nelson, Rise, Inc.
9. Melinda Estey, MnDOT
10. Ron Decker, VINE Faith in Action / TRUE Transit
11. Nick Leske, United Community Action Partnership, Inc./Community Transit
12. Cathleen Amick, MnDOT
13. Jennie Rowland, Bois Forte Band of Chippewa / Big Woods Transit
14. Michelle Lichtig, MnDOT
15. Chris Oesteicher, Rise, Inc.
16. Mindy Fields, Semcac / Rolling Hills Transit
17. Lori Van Beek, City of Moorhead / Moorhead Metro Area Transit
18. Mariah Kathan, DRB Consulting/RTAP
19. Berta Hartig, DRB Consulting/RTAP
20. Beverly Sidlo-Tolliver, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission
21. Alethea Koehler, Stevens County DAC
22. Stacy Struck, Prairie Lakes Transit
23. Davin Simmons, MnDOT
24. Mike Greenbaum, Newtrax
25. Scott Stark, St. Cloud Metropolitan Transit Commission/St. Cloud Metro Bus

Roles

- Moderator: Mariah
- Note taker: Berta
- Process Observer: Jeremy
- Timekeeper: Mindy
- Parking Lot Attendant: Michelle

Summary

1. Participants shared their experience with the vehicle shortage issue and what they hoped to gain from this roundtable. Many agencies reported that the vehicle shortage impacts them in multiple ways:
 - There is the immediate concern about having enough vehicles available to provide service today. Repairs are taking longer than usual (sometimes months) because parts are hard to get, which has impacted service in some areas and means their spare buses are being used a lot. Older buses are also reported to need more frequent repairs, so even if the turnaround for the repair isn't long, it is down for another the repair sometimes days or a week later. There has been a significant increase in the cost of labor for repairs, as well as parts being more expensive. Agencies report having difficulties securing used/rebuilt parts as well.

- There are increased maintenance costs for keeping high milage vehicles on the road. Agencies reported that they have vehicles with 300,000+ miles on them and that the vehicle drivers about 30-40,000 miles annually. The higher milage vehicles require more expensive repairs, such as for engine issues.
 - It is hard for them to plan for future service when the availability of new and replacement buses is unknown, and they don't know how much longer their high milage vehicles can operate.
2. Some agencies reported that if there wasn't a driver shortage that prevented them from adding service to meet demand, the driver shortage would impact them more. Some agencies have delayed adding routes/service due to driver shortage. Some agencies reported not being able to grow to meet the transportation gaps in the community due to lack of capacity/vehicles as well as driver shortages.
 3. There was discussion about if agencies would have the capacity and willingness to report/quantify the negative impact the vehicle shortage has had on service. The thought was that quantifying the impact could help lobbyists build the case for government intervention to support public transit bus production. Someone expressed concern about reporting reduced service having a negative impact on future funding. A counterpoint was raised: Ridership is already reported, so this would help explain WHY ridership was down. The idea of anonymizing the data was also shared.
 4. MAT Bus operates paratransit service and demand is higher for this than pre-pandemic. They have experimented using non-accessible vehicles to provide paratransit service for their ambulatory customers. They use their scheduling software to indicate the buses that can't take wheelchairs. So far, they have still been able to meet the needs of those who use wheelchairs with the accessible buses. It is important to note that they had a waiver from FTA to be able to do this. The FTA-5307 agencies work directly with FTA for vehicle purchases and waivers.
 5. Someone shared they thought requirement of all buses to be accessible vehicles is a MnDOT requirement, not a federal requirement. The FTA's requirement is that an agency would have a plan in place for how to meet the needs for people who need assistance if the transit agency wasn't able to. This plan would have to be published for the public to read.
 6. Another agency experimented with using a vehicle when the lift was down, and they still needed a bus. It wasn't as easy as they thought because people need assistance.
 7. There was discussion about alternative vehicles. Many agencies operate in a rural environment and don't think that larger passenger vehicles (greater than 16) are a good fit for their service.
 8. One of the success stories shared was that a larger agency (MAT Bus) was able to help a smaller agency obtain a needed part from their inventory. This was brokered by the parts vendor who knew the larger agency had it in stock and could get it to the smaller agency quicker. Another success story was one agency was able to purchase a used bus from another agency.
 9. One of challenges identified was to meet FTA requirements, such as Buy America. This is a hurdle for MnDOT's state bid offerings. MnDOT feels like their hands are tied.

10. One agency shared that they take parts from a bus they use for food delivery to fix their transit buses. Big Woods Transit (a tribal transit agency) was awarded an FTA grant for propane buses but has been told not to start the procurement process until April or May because they don't know the cost changes.
11. Agencies have reported using buses that were supposed to be deposited of.
12. Agency reported that they are not able to grow to meet the transportation gaps in the community due to lack of vehicles.
13. Rise, Inc. shared that they are partnering with Enterprise to secure smaller vehicles. They are also working with a vehicle broker to look for lightly used 15 passenger buses, but they are competing with everyone else in the country.
14. Rise, Inc. reported that they are unable to service all the geographic areas they normally do because they don't have drivers and vehicles with lifts. They have been using Metro Mobility or private transportation and have had to cancel or deny ride requests.
15. Prairie Lakes Transit was able to procure an accessible mini-van with assistance from MnDOT staff. It was a six-month process and they only heard from one company who bid on it. It was a capital project.
16. Stevens County DAC asked the John Deere implementation dealer if they could work on a bus and get it done the same day. They spent more than they normally do, but the vehicle got on the road.
17. Stevens County DAC shared that their day programs have an agreement with Enterprise, but they don't work with smaller programs. They required at least seven vehicles. Rise, Inc. shared that they have 15 passenger vehicles and mini vans from Enterprise. The sales people made it sound like it would be fast process, but it was still slow. They were presented with two options. They chose the lease where they pay for the bulk of the cost up front and they will get the title after five years. He said that Enterprise really wants to take control of their whole fleet, which is not something Rise realized up front. Enterprise wants to maintain the whole fleet, not just the vehicles purchased through them. Rise declined this. Ryan from Rise said people can reach out to him to learn more about this. Rise is trying to get into the Ford buying bank.
18. Mariah encouraged participants to email Harinee if they have any questions about bus procurement. Harinee wasn't available to attend today but wanted people to know they could reach out to her with questions.
19. There were three polls during the session:
 - Poll 1: How many have had their service impacted because the vehicle shortage: 4
 - Poll 2: Would you be willing to complete a survey or call to share how the driver and vehicle shortage has impacted your agency and service: 6
 - Poll 3: Future topics
 - 1 - 1
 - 2 - 2
 - 3 - 0

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Process Observer Report

1. This was a tough topic to keep on track and hard to find solutions because there isn't an easy solution.
2. Introductions took 30 minutes. This was time well spent because everyone got a chance to speak. Many people said the same thing.
3. The polls were good and seem to be on the fly. The recommendation is the plan for them for the future and use the Menti Meter app during the meeting. Polls can move along conversation get the pulse of group. People are able participate even if they don't want to talk.

Parking Lot Attendant Report

1. General:
 - Tina Neary followed up during the meeting that it is FTA that requires accessible vehicles and that OTAT enforces the rule. She read from the ADA circular that if an agency doesn't have accessible vehicles they must have a plan for accessible services and this plan must be reviewed on a regular basis by OTAT and the agency.
2. Solutions:
 - Short Term Leasing (Enterprise) or vehicle sharing with an organization that has an underused vehicle (assisted living)
 - Timeline – Need a solid timeline of potential vehicle availability - 5310 and other types of vehicles
 - Does FTA have a process to redistribute vehicles from transit agencies that cease operation? If so, how are transit agencies informed? What is the overall process?
3. Communicating the issue
 - Data need to tell story of vehicle shortage
 - Consider creating impact messaging to connect with advocate