



Transit Operations Committee

Date: Wednesday, July 7th, 2021

Time: 10:00am

Location: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting was held as a Virtual Public Meeting.

Attendance:

Voting Members

City of DeKalb: Bryan Faivre, Marcus Cox
City of Sycamore: Mark Bushnell (Chair)
DeKalb County: Kathy Ostdick (Vice Chair)
NIU: John Heckmann
NIU Student Assoc.: Rene Fuqua
Kishwaukee College: Michelle Rothmeyer

Non-Voting Attendance

DeKalb Transit: Sabrina Kuykendall Kvasnicka
DSATS Staff: Nathan Schwartz, Brandon Geber

Meeting Minutes

Call to Order: Chair Bushnell called the meeting to order at 10:02am.

1. Roll Call

2. Approval of Agenda (Action)

Motion to approve the July 7, 2021 meeting agenda and move item 5.c ahead of 5.a made by Chair Bushnell; seconded by Ms. Ostdick; Motion approved unanimously.

3. Approval of Minutes (Action)

Motion to approve the May 5, 2021 joint TOC-TAC meeting minutes made by Ms. Ostdick, seconded by Mr. Heckmann; Motion approved unanimously.

4. Public Comments

No public comments.

5. New Business

c. Discussion on Fare Collection for Urban Transit Services

Mr. Cox presented on the City of DeKalb's temporary fare suspension policy implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, how other transit agencies are reimplementing fare collection, and the financial impact of fare collection on regular operations. Discussion was then opened to the committee as to how the City should proceed with fare collection moving forward, including either the reimplementing of fares or a continued suspension.

Chair Bushnell asked how long the supplemental emergency funds received from the federal government will last in terms of covering fares. Mr. Cox responded they have used very little of the funds, with around 90%, or around \$4 million, remaining. Chair Bushnell asked if there was a sunset provision on the use of funds and Mr. Cox and Ms. Kuykendall Kvasnicka responded there is not.

Ms. Fuqua asked if the fare suspension was due to health and safety or for economic relief for riders. Mr. Cox responded it was a little of both, transforming from the former to the later as we progressed through the pandemic.

Ms. Rothmeyer inquired if questions regarding payment of service to Kishwaukee College should go through City of DeKalb Public Transit or VAC and Mr. Cox responded VAC would be the appropriate entity.

Ms. Ostdick asked if the loss of fare revenue would result in a decrease of service. Mr. Cox responded fare collection makes up a minor part of their budget and even if they didn't have the emergency funds to replace lost fare revenue, it would not impact service provided. Ms. Ostdick asked why the system collects fare if there would be no impact. Mr. Cox responded they would need to study the long-term feasibility of free fares and the potential costs associated with fare collection in the future. Ms. Ostdick asked if there was any social benefit to having riders buy-in to the service through fare collection. Mr. Cox responded they have not experienced any behavioral changes due to the suspension of fares but it would need further study.

Ms. Fuqua asked if collected fares are used for specific projects instead of service provision. Mr. Cox provided examples of what special projects the funds have been used for. Ms. Fuqua asked if those types of projects would have occurred if fare revenue was not available and Mr. Cox responded they would have found a way.

Mr. Heckmann commented NIU students technically pay for service through student fees instead of a farebox transaction, added that he is intrigued by a fare free system due to community and environmental benefits, and asked what DeKalb Public Transit is interested in pursuing. Mr. Cox responded the department is studying both options simultaneously but they see many financial and social benefits to remaining fare free.

Ms. Fuqua asked if there has been an increase in vandalism or incidents due to free fare ridership and Mr. Cox responded they cannot attribute any incident to free fares.

Mr. Heckmann recommended Mr. Cox present the direct benefits of implementing a fare free system to City Council against the burdens of the status quo fare collection.

Mr. Cox added according to FTA regulations, paratransit service is dependent on fare policies set for fixed-route service, and would also be made fare free.

Mr. Schwartz commented MPO staff has discussed a list of items for and against a fare free option, including fare collection equipment and maintenance, faster boarding, reduced conflicts when passengers cannot pay, and a simplified system navigation. Mr. Schwartz asked Mr. Cox if collected fares can be used as a local match for grants, and Mr. Cox answered they cannot. Mr. Schwartz also asked if NIU's current contribution from student fees is a set amount or is it indexed to ridership.

Mr. Heckmann answered it is a simple payment to cover operating costs incurred, and is not set at a certain amount. Chair Bushnell added it was set up originally as an

estimated amount when the systems were first combined and the consensus was to use as much grant money awarded as possible. Chair Bushnell asked Mr. Cox to elaborate on the original purpose of the fare suspension during the pandemic. Mr. Cox answered that it was originally a safety action and slowly encompassed meeting the financial needs of the ridership base.

Ms. Ostdick asked if the committee has interest in applying to county grant programs to supplement fares and what happens when a person currently can't pay their fare.

Mr. Cox answered the service will never leave someone if they cannot pay the fare.

Mr. Schwartz commented the transit service should keep peak service capacity, disruptive/non-destination passengers, and potential increases in vandalism in mind when discussing a continued suspension of fares. Mr. Geber added for consideration that a nearby transit agency has limited their fare suspensions due to an increase in vandalism and disruptive passengers and some national transportation research organizations have identified this as a recurring issue. Additionally, FTA's Title VI guidelines contain detailed requirements when making changes to fares.

Ms. Ostdick added they could put an end date on any motion to set a fare policy.

Mr. Geber responded there are restrictions on temporary fare policies that last for an extended period of time.

a. Urban Service Updates

Mr. Cox reported fixed-route service began operating its break service schedule on Saturday, May 1, 2021, which reduces service hours by approximately half when NIU is not in their fall or spring sessions. While service frequency is reduced around campus, city-centric services are not affected.

An amendment to the City's Transdev contract was approved at the April 26, 2021 City Council meeting to modify the existing fixed-route schedule on campus. This change will improve the efficiency of the service. Resulting financial savings will be used to increase fixed-route operator pay to remain competitive with other agencies throughout the state.

Paratransit ridership remains steady and on-time performance continues to be strong. DeKalb Public Transit is working with Transdev on a phone app for online scheduling and real-time updates and with RAMP for paratransit travel training. Staff is also working on an updated color scheme for paratransit vehicles.

DeKalb Public Transit recently went through their FTA Triennial review process and only received a single finding, which was great compared to eight findings in 2017. They now have 60 days to correct the action, of which Transdev is already working to resolve the issue.

Mr. Schwartz mentioned FTA was extremely complimentary of the work completed by the local transit agency and staff should be commended. Mr. Geber added FTA referenced the right team is in place to run a model transit system.

Mr. Cox reported fixed-route ridership is slightly down as statistics are still being compared to pre-pandemic levels, but that ridership is expected to climb as the state continues to reopen.

b. Rural/On-Demand Service Updates

A representative from VAC was not present to provide an update.

d. Other Business

a. Staff and Project Updates

Mr. Geber reported staff is currently updating Google Street View imagery throughout the metropolitan planning area, provided examples of coverage improvements, and briefly mentioned the community-wide benefits of the program.

Staff also recently received the latest Transit Asset Management measures and targets from the Rural Transit Assistance Center and will be presenting them for adoption from the committees in August.

b. What's New with our State and Federal Partners

No updates.

c. Additional Business

e. Adjourn

A motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Ostdick, seconded by Mr. Heckmann; meeting adjourned at 10:58am.

Note: These minutes are not official until approved by the Transit Operations Committee at a subsequent meeting.