



## Flathead County Transportation Advisory Committee

### Minutes

October 5, 2023

Meeting was held in person.

Location: 40 11<sup>th</sup> St West South County Campus 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

**Call to Order:** Director of Mountain Climber Elizabeth Wood, opened the meeting at 2:05 p.m.

**Members Present:** Randy Brodehl (Commissioner), Lukas Schubert, Jaden Woeppel, Kimberly Wortman (Big Mountain Commercial Association/Snow Bus)

**Staff Present:** Elizabeth Wood (Transportation Director), Brian Dykhuizen (Dispatcher),

**Guests:** None

**Public Comments:** There are no public comments to report. Elizabeth stated that going forward, public guests will be reminded that comments will be recognized during the time allotted for public comment in order to prevent disruptions later in the meeting. Randy Brodehl suggested for future meetings to establish a time limit per person for public comments. Committee members were in agreement.

**Chair Opening Remarks:** Elizabeth welcomed everyone to the meeting. Members introduced themselves.

**Approval of Minutes:** No approval of previous minutes as a quorum was not present.

#### **Transportation Director Update:**

- Ridership information: Handout provided.
  - Fair reintroduction: August saw a 20% decrease in ridership which was expected.
  - Freed up availability for persons needing rides.
  - August vs. September ridership, complimentary rides were still given in August to allow the public to get payment information into their accounts.
  - Historically summer ridership is down due to various circumstances, i.e. Nicer weather, longer daylight hours, biking vs. taking a car, etc.
    - **Question:** Kimberly asked since financials were mentioned if there was any information on the consequences financially of the drop in numbers.
    - **Answer:** Liz answered that it is difficult to determine exactly how much funding is reimbursable from the state or federal government since funding is not based entirely on ridership. The state does have a formula they work from.
    - **Question:** Lucas asked if the afterschool numbers included Sparks or is that just a separate category.
    - **Answer:** Liz answered that Mountain Climber is no longer providing transportation for Sparks except for Hedges. After School rides are now The

- Hive and Code Girls. Sparks numbers are included in the Special Events category for summer field trips and combined with the afterschool rides for Hedges kids.
- **General Ridership:** Mountain Climber tracks general ridership, seniors, and riders with disabilities. Over the last couple of years, ridership was 50% general rides, 25% seniors, 25% disabled. Since fairs have been reintroduced, there has been an increase in rides for Seniors and those with disabilities. During August, general ridership dropped to 33%. Riders with disabilities increased to 31% and rides for Seniors increased to 36%. September ridership was comparable.
    - **Question:** Lukas asked if pre-pandemic rides were the same percentage as now. (Aug/Sept 2023)
    - **Answer:** Elizabeth thought the ridership was comparable to pre-pandemic volumes, she will go back and review the numbers. Also noted, Mountain Climber was providing fixed route/city route runs along with Para-transit services.
    - **Question:** Lukas asked if the pure number of elderly and disabled riders went down from last year or remained the same.
    - **Answer:** Elizabeth stated she would print out statistics from a couple of previous years for comparison.
    - **Question:** Randy asked if the reduction in riders because of the fare, was due to people not getting on the bus just to ride around.
    - **Answer:** Elizabeth thought that was the case.
    - **Question:** Jaden asked if we feel we have the availability to do more outreach to general ridership but not the way it was being used in the past.
    - **Answer:** Elizabeth answered yes and stated that early morning and late afternoon is still very busy, and rides are hard to come by during heavy use hours. Driver shifts are being monitored to address any scheduling changes which may need to be made.
    - **Question:** Kimberly asked if there were any vehicles that weren't being used.
    - **Answer:** Elizabeth answered no. All vehicles are in use currently. The only exception to that would be our larger 27 passenger buses that are used periodically as needed for larger groups.
    - **Question:** Jaden asked if the state of Montana was any further along with its bus procurement.
    - **Answer:** Elizabeth answered no, contracts have been wiped out and are currently still being worked on by MDT.
  - **Fare Reintroduction:** Elizabeth reported that the process has gone smoothly, and she couldn't be happier with the results. Riders also seem to be fine with paying the fare and are appreciative of the service Mountain Climber provides.
    - A few hiccups were encountered getting the payment system set up but current issues have been resolved.
    - The voucher system is going as planned and are available for purchase by organizations which want to provide rides for their clients.
  - **Bus/Driver Update:**
    - **Question:** Jaden asked about prior talk of a new driver position being created.
    - **Answer:** Elizabeth reported that one new driver, an employee from LC Staffing, had been hired by Flathead County.
    - Elizabeth reported that two part-time positions were going to be added to the schedule soon. The positions are being created by reallocating the funds used

for LC Staffing to create two part-time positions with Flathead County. The positions will be created and offered first to the two drivers currently working through LC Staffing.

- **Question:** Randy asked if there were any new buses on order.
- **Answer:** Elizabeth answered there are no buses on order and any contracts must start over. Money allocated for new buses is still on the books and moved to CIP Funds.

#### **Old Business Discussions:**

- **Pilot program for intercity connectivity:** There is still a need in the valley to provide transportation between Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls. Elizabeth knows the State of Montana will provide some funding for this phase of development. Elizabeth plans to meet with Pete, Flathead County Administrator, to go over the planning process.
  - **Question:** Jared asked if there was any talk of creating transportation hubs within each city.
  - **Answer:** Elizabeth answered that there was no new discussion concerning transportation hubs, however still believes Columbia Falls would be a great spot to have a hub or transfer station.
  - **Question:** Lukas asked if any new bus stops would be built if intercity transportation routes were created.
  - **Answer:** Elizabeth does not foresee any new bus stops being built. All current bus stops are privately owned and do not belong to Mountain Climber.

#### **New Business Discussion:**

- **Warming Center Run:**
  - Eagle Transit/Mountain Climber has provided rides for the last three seasons at no charge.
  - Warming Center runs were started to help consolidate multiple ride requests all being scheduled at various times to and from the same locations making our drivers more efficient.
  - A schedule of two set stop locations, Salvation Army and ImagineIF Library, was eventually established to streamline service.
  - Beginning with the 2023 season of October 10, 2023, to May 1, 2024, fares will be charged.
  - Riders will be counted for the month then the Warming Center will be billed accordingly.
  - As in the past, the two drop off locations will continue to be the Salvation Army and ImagineIF Library.
  - **Question:** Jaden asked how many rides from the Warming Center were offered last season.
  - **Answer:** Elizabeth reported approximately 3200 rides, Warming Center to Library and Library to Warming Center, were provided between October 2022 – May 1<sup>st</sup> 2023
  - Potential income for this season would be approximately \$3200, depending on how many riders there will be.
  - The Salvation Army would like to have a dedicated pick-up time from that location since it is a designated drop off site.

- **Question:** Randy asked if the Salvation Army wanted riders to be dropped off at their facility.
  - **Answer:** Elizabeth answered that she spoke to Salvation Army on the hill and it is fine to have people dropped off at The Salvation Army. However, very few riders from the Warming Center go to the Salvation Army.
  - **Statement:** Randy stated that the security hours were increased at the library at cost to the taxpayer and asked if the library was ok with being a drop off location.
  - **Answer:** Elizabeth said the library was prepared for the influx of people and library employees are trained and ready for homeless individuals and dealing with certain situations.
  - **Question:** Kimberly asked if people had to leave the Warming Center during the day.
  - **Answer:** Elizabeth said yes, the Warming Center closes at 10 am and reopens at 6 pm. The library appreciates knowing when Mountain Climber is dropping off and picking up riders to the Warming Center.
  - The library expects homeless individuals whether Mountain Climber brings them there or not.
  - Kimberly thought it was a good use of resources, instead of multiple rides, there are only two in the morning with a return in the evening. Elizabeth pointed out that the drivers performing the morning and evening Warming Center runs to and from the library are at the beginning or end of their work shift so it works well for scheduling purposes.
  - There needs to be discussion on continuing the service from the Warming Center going forward.
- **Annual Public Meeting**
  - The Annual Public Meeting is typically held in December or January. Last year the meeting was in December and the weather was severe and only three people attended.
  - A suggestion was made to have the meeting in November rather than December.
  - Jaden noted weather was milder in November and Kimberly wondered if Elizabeth had time to plan the meeting. Elizabeth replied in the affirmative. Elizabeth believes that November could be better and allow for a larger public audience. The tentative date is November 16, 2023, 2:00-3:30 pm.
  - Along with phone calls and word of mouth, invitations are sent out to various public entities as well as advertising on the radio, Facebook, website and newspaper.
  - Kimberly provided thoughts on getting better participation at the public meetings and will forward articles related to engaging the public to Elizabeth. It is difficult to get the public involved and Elizabeth stated that attendance at the public meetings is usually low.
  - Elizabeth will research the possibility of conducting a meeting on Zoom and having the possibility of people being able to phone in to the meeting. She will also think about different meeting times.
- **Other business:**
  - **Question:** Jaden asked, since ridership is down, if either Brian or Elizabeth could speak on rider satisfaction.

- **Answer:** Both Brian and Elizabeth answered that current riders are expressing great satisfaction and an overall positive experience. Elizabeth also commented that “no shows” have also decreased significantly. Riders are happier since they are delayed by the bus waiting for someone to show up for the scheduled ride. Everyone is happier.
- **Question:** Jaden asked about eventual expansion of ridership and wondered if the spring of 2024 would be a good time to promote more advertising.
- **Answer:** Elizabeth answered she would have a good pulse on winter ridership and availability by the first of the year. The results from a rider survey from Sophie, our Via rep, will be provided at the next meeting.

### **Member Announcements**

- Jaden moved to town.

### **Next meeting will be December 7, 2023**

Meeting Closed at 3:10 p.m.