



Flathead County Transportation Advisory Committee

Minutes

October 13th, 2022

Location: Earl Bennett Building Second Floor Conference Room 1035 1st Ave W

Kyle Waterman called meeting to order at 2:03 p.m.

Members Present: Randy Brodehl (Commissioner), Jenny Cloutier, Kevin Warrington, Kyle Waterman, Karin Hilding, Tonya Horn, Molly Wright

Staff Present: Elizabeth Wood (Transportation Director), Kimberlee Ollinger (Office Coordinator)

Guests: Jane Emmert, Jen Rankosly

Call to Order: TAC Chair Kyle Waterman opened the meeting.

Public Comments: Jane- Someone in the pass from the Hospital represented themselves. It was brought to my attention that they were not attending regularly. So, they asked me if I can come so TAZ small transportation can be part of the conversation.

Chair Opening Remarks: Kyle welcomed everyone to the meeting. Members and guests introduced themselves. Kyle thanks Jan for coming to the meeting. Kyle asks how we are doing on the forms. There is not enough of people to take any action.

Approval of Minutes: Minutes of the June 2, 2022, meeting was reviewed. Randy Brodehl moved to approve the minutes. Second by Molly Wright. All in favor. Motion Passed.

Transportation Department Update- Elizabeth Wood Transportation Director

- Elizabeth expresses that it has been a busy couple months for Mountain climber and thanked everyone for attending the meeting.
- Rider ship
 - When the minutes get sent out the ridership numbers will be also sent out in the email.
 - Columbia Falls is averaging around 620-650 rides a month
 - Whitefish is averaging around 650-670 rides a month
 - A record month just shy of 700 riders in August. This wouldn't be possible without the second driver in Whitefish. It is difficult to get around in Whitefish, the second driver helps keep the riders satisfied and keeps the rider numbers up.
 - Overall ridership we are averaging around 6,500 a month. Over the 6,000 mark every month. We did see a decrease in our Kalispell ridership in September. Elizabeth explained the 1,000 ride decrease is in part due to the extra county seasonal driver and

one .5 driver with LC Staffing driving during the summer months. In September we began our Sparks after school program from 3-4 pm. Sparks after school program rides account for about 100-1200 rides in a month.

- Staff update-
 - Mountain Climber brought on a new driver through the county. He will be doing the warming center runs in addition to his regular route. This will fill one of the available full-time driver positions, we still have one full time available. Elizabeth is going to hold on to that full-time position until December or January with plans of transitioning our LC Staff driver to be hired on through the county.
 - Our contract with LC Staffing has been increased from 600 hrs to 800 hrs that they have to work through LC Staffing before being hired on or being paid out the remainder of the contract.
 - Kimberlee Ollinger was hired on as the new Office Coordinator. Kimberlee introduced herself to the committee.
- Elizabeth has held two all employee meetings with all inside staff and drivers. These all-staff meetings have been scheduled out to hold 5 meetings a year. Company Policies, safety policies and procedures, among other things are being covered in these meetings.
 - Top issue with drivers as expressed in their feedback is the increasing number of no shows with riders.
 - Numbers are getting higher with the no shows
 - We are acting on suspending riders that have large amounts of no shows.
- Fare reintroduction
 - Elizabeth is looking at the timeline of no earlier than January 1st for reintroducing fares, this date is a goal, and we are not certain of how long it will take to get a plan in place.
 - Elizabeth expressed why Mountain Climber should reintroduce fares.
 - Historically we collected \$40,000 a year for \$1 rides each way. This money was taken off the top of Mountain Climber federal funding. There isn't really a money value on putting this fare back in place. What it does is create an additional value to the service we are providing. Also creates accountability among our riders. Fewer no shows will help free up availability for other riders. We do have issues about mid-day and in some cases even the day before with being at max capacity on any given day.
 - **Question-** How much would the charge be?
 - **Answer-** Elizabeth: \$1 each way. In the past we had passes, \$25 for unlimited rides. We are still in the discussion process of what it might look like with VIA or whatever paying platform we go with.
 - **Question-** Will they pay when they make the reservation?
 - **Answer-** Elizabeth: Yes, that's where the countability comes in. My goal is not going back to fare boxes, there is a lot of time that goes into counting and processing the money. The fares would all be paid for by debit card or credit card or a prepaid credit card. For those that don't have the app, they could call dispatch to complete the transaction. The next popular question is what if they don't have debit/credit card (we are not going to be collecting cash or checks)? They would have to purchase a pre-paid debit card at the grocery store.
 - **Comment-** Whitefish Senior Center offered to do some training classes.
 - **Question-** Randy: Would this require a reader on the bus?

- **Answer-** Not necessarily. At this point I don't necessarily see us going that way, however it is something we can investigate and see what our cost comparison would be. It might be an easier route to go.
- **Comment-** Randy: Since we went away from fixed routes it moves the riders to use the app. I think this would be a good time to start the up the fare.
- **Question-** Did you figure out the issue between Via and the problem with the county processing the money?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: No, we haven't figured it out yet. At this point I feel like the best approach is going back to fares and I will be taking this decision and the discussion of paying platform to the commissioners. The decision will be made by the county if Mountain Climber will have their own credit card platform or if we pay to have Via accommodate the county's current platform.
- **Comment-** Tonya: I feel that we should maintain public transportation and provide it to everyone. The fee isn't the issues but the way of paying the dollar could be the problem. Every way should be looked at. Cash could be the only way some can pay.
- **Comment-** I think people would switch if they had training on how to use the app and how to pay for the rides.
- **Comment-** Behavioral health individuals that are going to the Warming Center don't have access to those types of resources. Its an access to care issue. This type of payment would be hard for them.
- **Comment-** Jane: How do they pay by calling in?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: Over 50% are booked on the app, we still have 45% rides booked over the phone. We will work with our riders to make it a smooth transition as best as we can. We removed the method of paying by check because we had the occasional bounced check. We are never going to make everyone happy with the payment method.
- **Comment-** Tonya: with just having one type of payment method a consequence is that some people can't ride and that is a very big barrier for public transportation. I feel we need to be looking at all types of payment methods.
- **Comment-** Kyle: There are some other solutions out there such as prepaid credit cards as donations. A big red flag is the \$1 fair charge with the banks.
- **Comment-** Do you have enough staff time to keep an eye on the Credit Card change over and training?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: Yes, it will increase our phone time for sure for a while however we do have the flexibility to bring certain staff in to help with phones if need be. Several drivers are cross trained on the phones as well.
- **Comment-** Elizabeth: In the past we have given united way bus pass slips good for one ride. I'm all for giving those slips out again as long as we track them and we prevent the idea of them being photo copied.
- **Comment-** Jane: Assist has rocking rides we have a stamp saying that this is from assist.
- **Comment-** Randy: We must abide by state law on our money process. If we accept cash, it will consume a lot of time. Making it costly labor wise for us. Sam uses QR codes once scanned the number is dead. This could be another solution for you.
- **Comment-** Tonya: Cards get lost all the time so cards could be difficult.
- **Question-** Kevin: Do you track your no shows?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: Yes, Via gives us a report.
- **Comment-** Kevin: Do track these no show rides? You are making a huge change just because of these no shows. We need numbers to see if it's a real problem.

- **Comment-** Elizabeth: we want our drivers to do (4) or more rides and hour. The issue with no show rides can prevent that from happening.
- **Comment-** Kevin: what does one no show cost you? The dollar is not important being fair and equal is and if you are going to suspend riders have a written policy that is easy to apply to everyone equally.
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: we do have written policy, but it is hard to be equal in public transportation. Our policy is 3 no shows and your suspended, but we take each no show, the rider and their circumstances into account.
- **Comment-** Tonya: Don't lower your standards, because maybe this is why the problem has become worse. The riders see it as Mountain Climber will do this for me and they don't care if you don't show up. That the policy isn't completely true. If the policy is 3 than it should be 3.
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: I agree with that, accountability is huge. The problem is manpower on our end. Try to track all these no shows. Via only does monthly reports and we would have to the daily no shows on our end. How we handle it is if a driver starts to see multiple no shows. They let dispatch know, dispatch investigates it.
- **Question-** Kevin: Does the app tell the rider they missed the ride?
- **Answer-** Yes via sends out notifications on the rides.
- **Question-** Why did you quite charging? Didn't you always charge?
- **Answer-** Yes, we always charged \$1 each way, we did fare free February a couple different years, then Covid hit, and we continued not to charge to help everyone out.
- **Comment-** Kyle: another solution could be no shows get charged \$5.
- **Comment-** Another solution could be the app blocks the user after 3 no shows.
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: I do not want to block the user for no shows, just because sometimes the riders booked a ride backwards and life happens.
- **Comment-** Well maybe adjust the no shows amount. Instead of blocking the rider what if a notification is sent out saying to contact dispatch about the 3 no shows. (GREAT IDEA)
- **Question-** How many rides do you a month?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: We average between 6,400-6,800 rides
- **Comment-** Jane: What I like about the on demand is sometimes some people can't walk to a bus stop. Also, I like charging because of the accountability however at Assist we do it on a donation basis.
- **Question-** Molly: When would you tell the riders you are going to start charging?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: A minimum of a months' notice, and January is just a goal to put this on our radar.
- **Question-** When are you getting the new buses
- **Answer-** Elizabeth: There is a Worldwide bus shortage. Last years and this years buses are going to be 3-5 more years out. Vans are bumped out to next year. We will not get any new buses for 3-5 years. Our maintenance costs are going to get spendy
- **Comment-** Electric buses have been a part of discussions across Montana but aren't a good option for Mountain Climber at this time. The Montana weather would be hard on them. They are big buses that we don't need or use often.
- **Comment-** Elizabeth: I do want to look further into the intercity commuter option I really feel the need is growing for that service. This service would connect our three cities to the airport and to the amtrack. Some food for thought between now and our next meeting is a transfer station or building in Columbia Falls, where we can transfer to the airport, amtrack, the park and between Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls.

Member Announcements

- Molly has agreed to be the new vice chair
- Jenny Covil is leaving the T.A.C
- Molly center is open at the college

Next meeting will be Thursday December 1st 2:00 p.m.

Meeting Closed at 3:30 p.m.

Submitted by: Kimberlee Ollinger



Flathead County Transportation Advisory Committee

Minutes

December 1st, 2022

Meeting was held in person

Location: 40 11th St West South County Campus 2nd Floor

Kyle Waterman called meeting to order at 2:03 p.m.

Members Present: Randy Brodehl (Commissioner), Kyle Waterman, Courtney Stone, Tonya Horn, Molly Wright

Staff Present: Elizabeth Wood (Transportation Director), Kimberlee Ollinger (Office Coordinator)

Guests: Melissa Nielsen (Voc Rehab & Blind Service), Ron Catlett (from Senator Daines Office), Jane Emmert (Assist/Logan Health)

Call to Order: TAC Chair Kyle Waterman opened the meeting.

Public Comments: Ron states he talked with Cory our legislative assistant for transportation about another bus option being compressed natural gas buses. Kyle thanks Ron for the discussion because of the backlog on buses. Jane had some questions regarding the compressed natural gas. Ron explains that you would have to have an infrastructure for it but it's just like gas/diesel you fuel up and go. Kyle explained some of the issues and challenges for electric buses in our part of the country. Kyle informed the board that he is not going to reapply for the TAC Committee. Kyle has served two terms on the TAC Committee and the complaints about Eagle Transit motivated him. Since Mountain Climber rebranded, there are not nearly as many complaints. Mountain Climber has come a long way with the rebranding.

Chair Opening Remarks: Kyle welcomed everyone to the meeting. Members and guests introduced themselves.

Approval of Minutes: Minutes of the October 13, 2022, meeting was reviewed. It was brought up that Jeny's last name was spelled wrong in the minutes. Tonya Horn moved to approve the minutes as corrected. Second by Courtney Stone. All in favor. Motion Passed.

Transportation Department Update- Elizabeth Wood Transportation Director

- Elizabeth updates the committee about the reintroduction of Fares.
 - Nothing new for the fares at this time, it's a matter of which method is going to work best for the majority of our riders and best with Mountain Climber. Elizabeth spoke with Via and asked many questions on using the app for payment. She has a meeting with Via coming up where she will get more answers to her questions.
 - Elizabeth states that her deadline of reintroducing the fares in January was ambitious but it took the conversation off the shelf, and we are actively going to be working on it.

- Elizabeth researched different pricing that other cities are charging and feels that the dollar is a good price. Elizabeth then asks if the dollar is a reasonable price?
 - Open discussion
 - **Comment-** Its nice to reintroduce the fares back at the price they were before we stopped fare collecting.
 - **Elizabeth-** We are leaning toward that dollar and a possible discount for seniors. The value of putting this fare back in place is not the money, but rather creating extra value in the service and accountability for our riders. The majority of the fare money collected will come right off the top of our funding. The hope is that it will improve the service we provide to our customers.
 - **Comment-** The goal was to have an automatic way to pay it, so if they no showed they would pay still.
 - **Elizabeth-** Yes, that is where the accountability comes in. We have discussed the no shows in the past and they continue to be an ongoing issue. One good way to handle the no shows would be to bring that one-dollar fare back. It would be more efficient way for Mountain Climber's staff to address the issue requiring less tracking, phone calls, and more. If the rider is required to pay ahead and they don't cancel the ride the rider is out their dollar.
 - **Comment-** Kyle- Having just done some traveling and using public transportation during my vacation I would suggest making it as convenient and easy as possible. Using Apple Pay just scanning my phone was easy and convenient. It might be cumbersome and hard to use a certain one card scan system.
 - **Question-** Jane What do you think about the homeless and would the phone-based pay work for them.
 - **Response-** Tonya- I disagree, they aren't going to be able to use an app. I understand that cash would be inconvenient for Mountain Climber but having them pay through the app and not taking cash would be very difficult if not impossible for the homeless. It would make it even harder for them to get out of being homeless.
 - **Comment-** Randy- Do you have a number on how many people are working on coming out of being homeless?
 - **Response-** Tonya- I would say they are all working on it in one way or another to their ability.
 - **Comment-** Randy- if there was a way for them to pay cash would that work?
 - **Response-** Tonya- Yes, I also think everyone needs to be held accountable and have that sting. They could come up with that dollar. I'm not asking for free rides I'm asking for a way that they can do it.
 - **Comment-** Randy- If you and Elizabeth were to come together and find a solution like Warming Center pay cash to Mountain Climber for chips for rides.
 - **Response-** Tonya- Yes but not for the set rides that are picked up from the Warming Center to the Library. For the in-between rides like doctor appointments ect.
 - **Response-** Elizabeth- We can discuss scholarship rides. In the past we had our scholarship ride tickets photocopied. We would need to figure out a solution on what to use to prevent that again. I understand that no cash creates a difficult barrier. We'll have to come up with a solution if that's you collecting a dollar and maybe you give us a donation. Or maybe we give you a certain number of passes for bus admission.
 - **Response-** Tonya- We can do stuff on our end, for tracking who we are giving passes to.

- **Comment-** Elizabeth- We want to make this transition as smooth and user friendly as possible. I need to talk with other providers and get more information on different options. The app might not work with what we are trying to do, this is still to be determined.
- **Comment-** Randy- When you are in discussions with vendors ask about a QR code or something along those lines. It could function like how they do at the rodeo, where you're the only one that can get in with it.
- **Response-** Melissa- 80% of my clients don't use smart phones, they are the call-in people. I'm not too sure what solution you have for that, but there is a good amount of my people that are call in to schedule their rides.
- **Response-** Elizabeth- I would say based off the data we have, about 55% of our total rides are booked through the app and 45% over the phone with our dispatchers. That is a very nice percentage. When asked how many people book through the app at other agencies' numbers weren't as high. To answer your question, we would need to continue educating our clients and help them decide what method would work best for them. No matter what method we choose I feel like our dispatchers will be assisting riders with rides over the phone. Our dispatchers have always been good about helping that 45%. Another good launch time would be perhaps next fiscal year starting in July.
- **Question-** Jane- Do you feel like the software over promised?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth- No I do not feel that Via over promised. We didn't ask this question. That question being what is the credit card platform you use? The other folks that are using Via in the state didn't ask this question either however they aren't running into the same issues as we are. Such as the county having a certain credit card platform we use, and not wanting to add another one. If Via adapted to ever single credit card platform out there it would be a nightmare for them. They can adapt to other CC platforms, but the price is so high no one does it. It would cost up to \$25,000 to adapt Via to our county credit card platform. I don't think they over promised, we didn't ask the question because we didn't think of it being an issue.
- **Question-** Jane- What would be the cost for the county to add in a second credit card platform? What would it take to recoup it?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth- I don't know what it would take to recoup it. I think it is more of a time and consistency issue from their perspective.
- **Answer-** Randy- We deal with a tight budget office who try to prevent comments during an audit. When all the sudden you enter a new platform, you're at risk of having those comments which is not good for the county. Just because its good for one department doesn't mean its good for the whole county.
- Elizabeth gives a little update on buses.
 - They all have studs on their tires, so the snow isn't slowing them down.
 - We still do not have an arrival date for the vans.
- Elizabeth gives update on bus advertising.
- The county PIO (Public Information Officer) Steven featured Mountain Climber on the County Facebook Page. The Mountain Climber post had the most shares the county Facebook page has had since he started the page in August with 99 shares.
- The call volume after the Facebook post has mostly been commuter questions regarding rides to and from Whitefish, Colombia Falls and Kalispell. Getting a connecting run between the cities is still one of top priorities for future service expansion. Additionally, we have had a real influx of

driver job requests with 6 people recently reaching out to apply for driving position at Mountain Climber.

- **Comment-** Molly Is there a way to keep track of those people interested in the job?
- **Answer-** Elizabeth- Yes, I am reaching out to all of them. If they are looking for part time, then I am redirecting them to go through LC Staffing. I am reaching out to them and keeping their information on file for later if need be.
- Intercity commuter connecting Kalispell, Whitefish, Columbia Falls, airport, and train depot.
 - **Elizabeth-** I did visit with the state about a pilot program grant. We don't have the funds to do these runs currently however a pilot program could help us get the funds. The state said that they would be interested in helping us fund this pilot program. They have both capital and operating funds to put toward this idea. If the pilot program shows to be successful, then those funds could ultimately be added to our existing funds going forward.
 - **Question-** Could you explain this a little more? Would you have a ride going up to the train depot in the morning? Or is it call and schedule?
 - **Response-** Elizabeth- It would be more of a commuter route. In the past we had a commuter run with times that were not very convenient. With a commuter run you must have down time in the middle or else it is considered a fixed run. It would involve two different buses, one that goes Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls. Then one from Kalispell, airport, Columbia Falls. The Whitefish bus would connect and pick up airport riders in Columbia Falls. A requirement for this route from the state is that you are connecting to other transportation modes such as the airport and Amtrak.
- Columbia Falls transfer station option in Columbia Falls.
- **Elizabeth-** If everyone can start thinking about a transfer station in Columbia Falls. There are potential funds available for capital from the state. I'm not saying it needs to be a big building, but maybe something that is bigger than a bus shelter and keeps riders out the elements a bit.
 - **Question-** Who have you talked to in Columbia Falls about this so far?

Response- Elizabeth I haven't talked to anyone yet; however I plan on reaching out Columbia Falls City and attending a City Council Meeting in February.

- **Question-** Molly- Are their requirement for space, location, and parking?
- **Response-** Elizabeth- I will look into requirements. We have a spring meeting with the state coming up in May, but hopefully I can get some answers before then.
- **Comment-** Kyle- Possibly reach out to Mick Ruis for a resource on someone in Columbia Falls who does development. Getting an opinion from people that are doing the same type of work and what they see.
- **Comment-** Courtney- Xanterra already has a bus barn there, having a bus transfer place by Montana Coffee Traders and Xanterra would be a nice place to have it.
- **Comment-** Tonya- I would also investigate churches as an option. They have the parking spaces.
- **Question-** Jane What are we trying to connect them to?
- **Response-** Elizabeth- The main purpose would be to connect them to Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls. We truly do get more calls about that connection over any other call. Right now, we only have two sets of times to and from Whitefish and Columbia Falls. For Whitefish the bus leaves Kalispell at 9:00a.m. and goes to Whitefish then comes back to Kalispell at 4:00pm. For Columbia Falls the bus leaves at 8:15am and comes back at 3:30pm. The first goal is to connect the cities and get people to work, appointments, FVCC, and other things. Second goal is to help the out-of-town visitors get into town from the Amtrak or the airport.

- **New Business**
 - **Elizabeth-** We have our public meeting scheduled for December 20th from 2:00-3:30 in the second-floor meeting room of the Flathead County South Campus Building. Last year's meeting we had a very good turnout.
 - **Question-** Tonya- What do you do at the public meeting?
 - **Answer-** Elizabeth We are required to send out inventions to any business that is tied to transportation in the valley, such as taxi service, limo service, car rentals and others. Then we reach out to people that would have clients or would benefit themselves from our service. We open the floor to public comment, to see if they have any questions or suggestions on how they feel we could improve the service we provide.
 - **Question-** Would the state pay for weekend rides?
 - **Answer-** Elizabeth- Yes, it would fall under a pilot program. Historically we struggled with finding drivers on the weekend. The Whitefish weekend run wasn't very successful the last 3-4 years.
- **Ridership numbers handout**
 - 1st Quarter shows we were up in August, October, and November.
 - July appears to be significantly lower however we were short a seasonal driver and there was a lot of vacation time taken as well. Both resulted in a substantial driver hour decrease.
 - Rides per hour still averaged 4/ hr. Commuter rides have gone up.
 - **Question-** Molly- Do you know why the commuter numbers jumped up in October so much?
 - **Response-** Elizabeth- Word of mouth about the connection to Whitefish and Columbia Falls. We also have a rider that travels with her two kids to Columbia Falls on Thursday and Friday. They travel from Kalispell to Columbia Falls for school and the mother volunteers over at the school. Then they come back when school is out. That is 6 rides for every time they take Mountain Climber. We also transport her to work when she doesn't go to Columbia Falls. This is a great story to use with the on-demand service we are now providing. Occasionally we have this question on when are you going to bring fixed routes back again? If we were doing fixed routes, we wouldn't be able to reach her to take her to work or her and the kids to school.
 - **Comment-** Kyle- Between the affordability and accessibility that is why we are succeeding and that is why we do these services.
- **Elizabeth goes over fleet and milage handout.**
 - Normally we would have retired some of these buses by now but since there is shortage of buses, we will not be doing that anytime soon.
 - Maintenance costs are going to go up.
 - **Question-** Jane- when do you try to retire a bus? 200,000 miles?
 - **Response-** Elizabeth- It depends on the bus but that is when we try to.
 - **Comment-** Kyle- Suggests that TAC members get a tour of Mountain Climber and meet the staff.

Member Announcements

- Talk with Steve our PIO to see if he is going to post on Facebook about our vacant county committees.
- Kyle is leaving the committee after serving for two terms. His role ends this month.

- Ideas on who should be on the board.
 - A student or someone younger
 - Special Friends
 - Sparks
 - Someone from Greater Valley Health
- You can find the application process on the county website.

Next meeting will be February 2nd 2 p.m.

Meeting Closed at 3:13 p.m.

Minutes submitted by: Kimberlee Ollinger

Flathead County Transportation Advisory Committee MINUTES

Thursday February 2nd, 2023

2:00-3:30 pm

South Campus Building Second Floor Conference Room

40 11th St West

- I. Call to Order and Introductions
 - a. Elizabeth called the meeting to order at 2:00pm.
 - b. Elizabeth nominated Molly Wright to serve as the new TAC Chair since Kyle Waterman stepped down. Courtney Stone moved to approve and Karin Hilding seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.
- II. Public Comment
 - a. There was no public comment.
- III. Chair Opening Remarks
 - a. Molly welcomed the committee and thanked the group for her appointment as TAC Chair.
- IV. Approval of Minutes – December 1st, 2022
 - a. Minutes of the December 1, 2022 meeting were reviewed. Glenn noted that the word “bus” was misspelled on page 4. Glenn moved to approve the minutes as corrected, and Karin Hilding seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.
- V. Transportation Director Update / Welcome new TAC Members
 - a. Elizabeth reviewed ridership numbers from July 2022 – June 2023. She highlighted high ridership numbers in January 2023, notably in Columbia Falls and on the Commuter Run.
 - b. Karin asked if the second driver in Whitefish is a year-round employee, and Elizabeth confirmed they are.
 - c. Randy asked about the zero ridership numbers under the DPHHS Contract, and Elizabeth confirmed that although there is no contract currently in place, there will be a DPHHS Contract in the next fiscal year.
 - d. Karin suggested hosting a training at the senior community centers to educate seniors on using the ridership app, and Elizabeth agreed.
 - e. Elizabeth also noted there will be one new driver in Whitefish through LC Staffing.
 - f. Cinnamon asked about examples of special events rides, and Elizabeth provided a few examples including schools and events through Logan Health.
- VI. Old Business discussions:
 - a. T.A.C. vacant positions
 - i. Elizabeth noted there are still vacancies on the TAC and encouraged the committee to spread the word. Glenn asked about the number of vacancies and Elizabeth said there are three open positions, with a specific need for someone to represent the hospital/nursing home/retirement community.
 - b. Reintroduction of fares
 - i. Elizabeth noted they are moving forward by July 1, and noted they will be speaking with Via about options for payment. Karin asked about a monthly pass for riders, and Elizabeth confirmed there will be that option but the form of payment will still need to be decided.

- c. Intercity Commuter connecting Whitefish, Kalispell, Columbia Falls, airport, and the train depot.
 - i. Elizabeth noted this is the top priority once the budget and TCP are in place. She noted the majority of the inquiries they receive are about the need for this service, especially for students.
 - ii. Marci asked if Evergreen is being serviced, and Elizabeth confirmed they are served by two buses that drive the route from Kalispell to Evergreen to the airport and ending in Columbia Falls.
 - iii. Marci asked about the bus stop bench installations in Kalispell, and Elizabeth noted that they are owned by a separate advertising company and are in the process of removal due to no fixed city route and due to public complaints. She also confirmed that the on-demand service is serving more members of the public and there will be no fixed route in the near future because a paratransit route is required in tandem with the fixed route.
- d. Public Meeting
 - i. Elizabeth noted that due to poor weather in December, only three people were in attendance, plus she received comments by email. Multiple people asked about expanding service to Bigfork.
 - ii. Karin asked how often the public meeting must be held, and Elizabeth confirmed it must be held once per year as part of the TAC funding formula.
 - iii. Marci asked if the date of the public meeting could be moved from December due to weather constraints, and Elizabeth confirmed the date could be moved, noting fall may be a better time to host the meeting.
 - iv. Karin offered to publicize the meeting in Whitefish.

VII. New Business discussions:

- a. Transportation Coordination Plan – Review and Vote
 - i. Elizabeth noted the Transportation Coordination Plan is updated yearly in February and is necessary for the TAC application for funding.
 - ii. Once the TAC reviews and approves the plan, it goes to the Flathead County Commissioners for a vote.
 - iii. The committee reviewed the Transportation Coordination Plan and provided feedback to Elizabeth.
 - iv. Due to time constraints for those needing to leave the meeting, Elizabeth asked the committee to finish reviewing the plan on their own and submit comments to Elizabeth via email.
 - v. The committee will vote on the TCP February 16th at 3:00pm via Zoom.

VIII. Member Announcements

- a. Next Meeting will be April 6th
- b. Elizabeth closed the meeting at 3:30pm.



Flathead County Transportation Advisory Committee

Minutes

April 6th, 2023

Meeting was held in person.

Location: 40 11th St West South County Campus 2nd Floor

Elizabeth Wood called meeting to order at 2:19 p.m.

Members Present: Randy Brodehl (Commissioner), Glenn Wehe, Jenna Justice, Tonya Horn, Jane Emmert, Kimberly Wartman, Karin Hilding

Staff Present: Elizabeth Wood (Transportation Director), Kimberlee Ollinger (Office Coordinator)

Guests: Melissa Nielsen (Voc Rehab & Blind Service), Chad Campbell (John Tester's Office), Ona Steward (Lincoln County Transportation)

Call to Order: Director of Mountain Climber Elizabeth Wood opened the meeting.

Public Comments: There are no public comments.

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

Approval of Minutes: List of attendees at the February 2nd meeting were missing. Randy Brodehl moved to approve the minutes as corrected. Second by Karin Hilding. All in favor. Motion Passed.

Guest Speaker – Sophia from Via

- Sophia is the Montana Rep.
- We had weekly Zoom Meetings with Sophia when we first launched, now we are down to monthly meetings starting in March.
- Power Point
 - Via Intro
 - Via is a transit technology company.
 - Mountain Climber is a Micro transit.
 - Performance Review
 - Via takes anonymous feedback from riders at the end of the ride.
 - Positive Reviews
 - 5,000+ riders per month
 - Most rides from Kalispell
 - Whitefish and Columbia Falls ridership percentage up from January 2022

- Hourly break down
 - Utilization- measure of efficiency
 - How many people are you transporting per hour.
 - Graph Hourly Break Down
 - 9 am – 10 am (Kalispell)
 - 36 request rides coming in on the app.
 - 11 am – 12 pm (Kalispell)
 - 50 request rides coming in on the app.
 - **Question-** Elizabeth Do these numbers here include denied requests as well?
 - **Answer-** Sophia Yes these are all requests.
- Trip Denials
 - Seat availability should never be 0%.
 - Unless you are running an ADA paratransit.
 - 3-4 pm 3 buses are pulled out for Sparks.
 - 4-5 pm those 3 sparks drivers are done with their shift.
 - 9-10 am fewer drivers coming in at this time, but we do have a couple drivers coming in at 10:00 am than start driving at 10:30 am.
 - We will need to start looking closer at trip denials to help with identifying how we should adjust coverage.
 - **Question-** Karin Is SPARKS a county program?
 - **Answer-** Elizabeth It is a Logan health after school program that we provide contracted service for.
- App
 - 44% of riders book by the app.
- Efficiency
 - Mountain Climber provides more rides with the same if not less supply on the road than before launching On Demand service.
- Questions for Sophia
 - **Question-** Karin asked if with the two buses in Whitefish, is there an indication on how much more space is available for the rider or is it maxed out?
 - **Answer-** Sophia Whitefish is reaching its capacity at times.
 - **Comment-** Elizabeth I agree with Sophia. Both drivers are really busy in the morning but in the afternoon time they hit a slow spot. So, it just depends on the time and day for Whitefish. We also took that second driver in Whitefish and put them in Columbia Falls after 2 o'clock. This is because our Columbia Falls driver has a hard time getting back on time, because Columbia Falls is getting so busy making it difficult for him to get a lunch break in and get everyone back home before he is supposed to leave town.
 - **Question-** Randy asked if the riders in Columbia Falls are using the app and commented that the numbers are significantly lower than the other cities for booking on the app. What can we do to get those numbers up?
 - **Answer-** Elizabeth commented that our Columbia Falls driver gives his number out to the riders. We are working on having him tell the riders over there to start calling dispatch or download the app.
 - **Question-** Randy asked what are we going to do about charging the fares again?

- **Answer-** Elizabeth answered that we have made a decision to use the Via app for payment. Our missing link right now is getting in touch with Braintree and getting the terms figured out.
- **Comment-** Sophia mentioned that on Via's end once Braintree is set to go, Via is mostly ready to put whatever fee structure in place that we decide on. Braintree's end could take around 6-weeks to get squared away.
 - **Question-** Karin asked what the fare will be.
 - **Answer-** Elizabeth mentioned that we will have to wait until we know the fees and associated with each transaction before we can make a final decision on the fare rate. I am still talking with Braintree, our Finance Department, and the Treasurer Office.
 - **Question-** Karin asked if it will likely be \$1.00 per charge.
 - **Answer-** Elizabeth stated that it isn't set in stone yet with that price, however that is what we are still aiming for is a dollar. If we need to go higher it would probably be between \$1.00 to \$1.50.

Transportation Department Update/Old Business Discussions- Elizabeth Wood Transportation Director

- Transportation Coordination Plan is complete and sent off to the state.
- Mountain Climber is on the tail end of getting the budget approved by Finance and the Commissioners.
- Ridership (Flathead County Transit FY 2023 Ridership (July 2022- June 2023 Chart handout)
 - March
 - 7,532 rides for all cities + commuter + Sparks
 - 4,225 rides for Kalispell
 - 685 rides for Whitefish
 - 592 rides for Columbia Falls
 - Record breaking rides.
 - Our ridership number and Sophia's ridership number don't match up. The reason is Sophia's numbers are the numbers sent through the Via system. For example, if a rider books a ride for one rider but there are 3 passengers, Via reports only one rider not the other two.
 - We keep paper manifests in which we track our ridership numbers and use that data for reports sent to the state. The drivers also record on their manifest, riders such as:
 - General Riders
 - Riders with a disability
 - Elderly Riders
 - General Public about 50%
 - Riders with disabilities about 25%
 - Senior riders about 25%
 - It's up to the driver's discretion to figure out where the rider is recorded.
- **Question-** Jenna asked if there is a way that service providers can use the app to book a ride for their clients.
- **Answer-** Elizabeth answered no, because the app is tied to your information rather than theirs such as your phone number and email. You can, however, call into dispatch and schedule a ride for the client.

- **Comment-** Karin mentioned that we have conducted the training in the past.
- **Response-** Elizabeth stated that yes, we have conducted training in the past. We haven't held any training in about a year, so we are due for some additional training. This time more specifically geared at how they can pay for their rides on the app. We plan to do some training at Whitefish Community Center, Columbia Falls Senior Center, and here at the AOA. Our turnout is always good, with people of all ages coming and learning about the app.
- **Question-** Jane asked if we could tell her why the ridership went up so dramatically, what did we change.
- **Response-** Elizabeth mentioned that back in January 2022 we launched 5-day service in Columbia Falls. Prior to that we only provided one day a week service. Before COVID we had a 5-day a week service, then during COVID we dropped it back to the one day a week. We were averaging about 20 rides a day prior to COVID. Until Doug took over Columbia Falls, he does an amazing job spreading the word about our service up there.
- **Question-** Jane asked for clarification on Columbia Falls and Whitefish having their own designated driver.
- **Answer-** Elizabeth answered yes, those drivers do one Kalispell stop in the mornings then head out to their designated city. There is a one commuter pick-up in the designated city before heading back to Kalispell.
- Returning to the Ridership (Flathead County Transit FY 2023 Ridership (July 2022- June 2023) handout
 - DPHHS Contract
 - We don't have a contract with them currently. However, I do anticipate that once we start charging again, we will have one in place again.
 - We never stopped transporting those riders that we had on the contract; we continue to provide those rides with no issues. With Zero Fare, we are not collecting any contract money.
 - Sometime in Fiscal Year 24 we will possibly enter into another contract with them because we will begin charging again.
 - Charging will help with those riders riding all the time down to just a need to a want to ride. As well as help with no shows with riders.
- **Comment-** Elizabeth mentioned her goal is to start charging around July 1st. By reintroducing fares, we hope to create more availability and bring our trip denial percentage back down. By charging this should help create some availability.
- **Question-** Randy asked if this will also help with the no shows.
- **Response-** Elizabeth commented that when you pay for your trip you are then invested into the ride. Once you book your ride it will collect your dollar payment. If you decided you want to cancel the ride, that's when you would call or use the app to cancel the ride and get credit for a future ride, however if you don't cancel the ride, you will still be charged the dollar.
- **Question-** Will we be accepting cash?
- **Response-** Elizabeth answered that we are getting away from cash all together. It's not an uncommon thing to get away from cash these days for multiple reasons. you will be able to use your card on the app. If you can't use a card on the app riders can reach out to the dispatch office and they will help process your payment. I know there are a lot of questions around the card payment method, such as how are riders going to pay if they don't have a bank account. We will instruct organizations in town to refer riders to us on a case by case basis if they feel they may have a hardship and might need a scholarship ride to get to an organization that can further assist them. Another option could be using a prepaid Visa card from the grocery store. It comes down to educating the riders on how to use the app and how to pay for the rides.

- **Question-** Jane asked Tonya how would this affect the Warming Center.
- **Response-** Tonya answered that we have talked about that in past meetings. It will become challenging because most of them don't have bank accounts. We have talked about vouchers and recently discussed it with the Collaborate Housing Solutions group and we tossed around some ideas. I told Elizabeth about the discussions and would still like to see us make it work for all, since it is public transportation. This could be challenging, especially since we can't just hand them a dollar. The problem is not having to pay the dollar, it's more the payment method.
- **Question-** Randy asked Tonya if Collaborative Housing Solutions could possibly collect or get money to pay for some cards and get those to the Warming Center to use for booking rides.
- **Response-** Tonya mentioned that she couldn't speak to each individual group and their budgets. The problem I am looking at is how is the person going to get a ride before they can get a voucher from us for the first time. After that it is fine because they will have that voucher.
- **Response-** Elizabeth mentioned she feels this is where the promo codes will come in handy. We will need to work on educating and getting the word out to other organizations such as Samaritan House, Food Bank, CAP, Warming Center, Etc. It will be up to their discretion which individuals they refer to us for a possible promo or scholarship ride
- **Question-** Jane asked what we will do if one person books a ride but when the driver pulls up there are an additional 3 people.
- **Response-** Elizabeth When you are in the app there is a place where you can add those additional people and charge them as well. In the past when Mountain Climber was charging a dollar per person the only exception was if the person was a personal attendant, they would not be charged. If The rider forgot to mention that there would be additional riders we will probably give them a reminder the first time and allow the others to ride.
- **Question-** Glenn asked if kids under 12 are free.
- **Response-** Elizabeth answered that right now it's not stated that kids under a certain age are free we must figure out how we are going to do that. We have our after-school kids that we do charge, and we'll have to fine tune that. We normally don't allow kids under the age of 10 to ride by themselves. When they have an adult with them yes, we don't charge for those children.
- **Comment-** Kim asked if we still need to know how many additional riders are with them, because of seat availability.
- **Response-** Elizabeth stated that she was correct, our drivers have been strict about that. We had an incident where a driver pulled up in a van and there wasn't enough room.
- **Comment-** Randy asked Elizabeth if you could just go over how you lose a dollar when you gain a dollar in transit.
- **Response-** Elizabeth explained that nearly every dollar we collect in fares comes off the top of our federal funding. It's more about creating a better value to the service we are providing and accountability to those that no show. We have riders that ride just to ride with no particular place to go, others will book a ride to Wal-Mart every single day because they love our drivers and just want to get out of the house as we are their only means to get out of the house in some cases. Paying for rides again will make each rider consider whether they really need or want the ride.
- **Question-** Jane asked what percentage of no shows you think you get.
- **Response-** Elizabeth answered that she doesn't have those numbers off hand, however we have a big portion of those that are cancellations as well.
- **Question-** Kim asked if we do any tracking on no shows per person.
- **Response-** Yes, we do. So typically, we do three no shows than you get warned. Sometimes this doesn't always work out because there are technical difficulties with how riders book their

rides. They are tracked, and if we see a pattern with it then we suspend them for a determined period of time.

- **Question-** Tonya asked when we anticipate that we will make the decision on the vouchers.
- **Response-** Elizabeth answered that we can start working on that now. I know we talked about an option of where we give you guys the vouchers, and they pay you guys, the problem with paper vouchers you are not able to prepay for a ride with a paper voucher. We will need to work through what this will look like.
- Elizabeth will give an update/more information when Mountain Climber decides on the Fares.
- Elizabeth's top priority for future discussions after fare reintroductions would be a intercity commuter route.
 - Tri City Commuter Whitefish – Kalispell – Columbia Falls
 - Think about what the need is in the Valley from your perspective.
 - Pilot Program would help with this need because the funding wouldn't disappear within one year unlike a grant. We will need to plan ahead for our match portion of this down the road.

Next meeting will be June 8th 2 p.m.

Meeting Closed at 3:34 p.m.