

Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

Pilot Transit Working Group

Microtransit Chat: Thematic Summary

May 7, 2021

10:00 AM–11:00 AM, Zoom Video Conferencing Platform

Representatives of regional transit authorities (RTAs), transportation management associations, municipalities, state agencies, other transit providers, researchers, and members of advisory groups met for one hour to discuss microtransit and other on-demand transit service. Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) staff suggested the following discussion questions for this meeting:

1. What about microtransit or on-demand transportation would you most like to learn?
2. If you are currently operating a microtransit service, what are some of your current successes and challenges? How are you measuring the success of your service?
3. What opportunities do you see for microtransit in the near future, either in your service area or in general?
4. What resources (funding, technology, etc.) would you like to have to launch a service or support an existing service?

Greater Attleboro and Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA) Microtransit

- GATRA had some underperforming fixed routes, a regional dial-a-ride service, and a long-distance medical service in a four-town area (Franklin, Wrentham, Norfolk, and Foxborough). It now serves all these trip types with microtransit. If vehicles are not needed to provide long-distance medical trips into Boston on a particular day, they can be used to provide local service.
- GATRA's microtransit service is operated by the same company that operated the regional dial-a-ride and fixed-route services, and it uses the same dispatch office and vehicles used for dial-a-ride and fixed-route service. This company is working with a software developer by serving as a test case for a booking app, but people are still able to call the dispatch center as an option.

- GATRA's booking software includes an automated National Transit Database (NTD) report function, which makes reporting much simpler than sampling on fixed routes and dial-a-ride services.
- Missed trips are easier to handle through the microtransit service than the dial-a-ride service. Because of same-day scheduling, a new vehicle can quickly be assigned to pick up the passenger.
- GATRA worked with Dean College to have the college pay their fares, so that the rides are free to students. The customers have been happy about the service.
- Riders have expressed appreciation for GATRA's microtransit service when they have switched from fixed-route service.
- It is important to consider what is most effective for a given community when implementing transit, including microtransit. What works for one community might not work for another. GATRA's microtransit service in Franklin would not function as well in Attleboro or Taunton, where fixed route is established and more effective.

Microtransit Service for Seniors and People with Disabilities

- The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's (MBTA) The RIDE provides a lot of trips, but it can be difficult to use. It has limited hours and in dense urban areas people need to leave a lot of buffer time around their appointments because their driver's arrival time is often unpredictable. How else can we support these kinds of trips?
- The Franklin Regional Transit Authority leverages space on its demand-response vehicles by giving priority to those with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) eligibility who make advance reservations, but empty seats are then made available to the general public. People with disabilities can also make spontaneous trips using this system.
- Because GATRA's microtransit program uses vehicles from GATRA's fixed-route and demand-response fleets, GATRA had vehicles to provide wheelchair accessible rides.
- GATRA has some difficulty training seniors on how microtransit works, how it improves upon the service they had before, and how to use the technology. The pandemic curtailed in-person training. Dispatchers would explain the service to callers and tell them they could get same-day on-demand service.

- Similarly, the Town of Burlington provides rides using Lyft and seniors can use [GoGo Grandparent](#) to request rides. The Town also had difficulty teaching seniors the technology, especially during the pandemic.
- GATRA's service gives people automated reminder calls to confirm upcoming trips and text notifications 10 minutes before their trip. Their system also has the option to make automated calls to clients so they can say their credit card number over the phone.
- It may be beneficial, and even necessary, to retain dispatchers that people can call in addition to having an app. Dispatchers build relationships with the clients that contact them.

Taxi and Transportation Network Company (TNC) Coordination

- How can we support and build up the taxi industry so that they can help meet demand-response needs? How can we help to get more vehicles into their pools and get more of them on the [Curb](#) app?
 - The Town of Lexington has received funding from the [Taxicab, Livery, and Hackney Transportation Partnership Grants Program](#) (administered by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council and funded by MassDevelopment) to provide medical trips. This helped the town meet demand for these trips during the pandemic, when volunteer driver support was less available.
 - How else could funds from MassDevelopment be used to support the taxi industry?
- The Town of Brookline's Council on Aging provides discounted rides through Lyft and GoGo Grandparent to provide call-in service. How does this compare to providing similar trips using microtransit?
- A few years ago, GATRA had a partnership with Uber and neighboring agencies to provide trips outside of GATRA's service area. Each agency received a number of Uber promotional codes that it could distribute to riders. This program was 50 percent funded through a consortium of organizations. The Uber program is now self-sufficient and independent.

Other Challenges and Considerations

- Microtransit has become a buzzword and is frequently treated as a magic bullet.
- The Town of Lexington conducted research and found that replacing its existing fixed-route service with on-demand service would not be as cost-effective. More

people can be served per hour with fixed-route service than demand-response service.

- An important consideration is how we help more people access fixed-route service.
- On-demand services can still involve long waits for people because a vehicle needs to be available for their trip. There also can be a lot of deadheading involved in providing the trips.
- Microtransit can complement the fixed-route system by providing first-and-last mile connections. RTAs can also consider deploying microtransit for part of the day when fixed-route transit may not be as effective, such as in the evenings.
- Microtransit works well in low density communities where there is too little demand for fixed-route service for it to be efficient. Microtransit deployed in high density areas would require too many vehicles, and there would be too much demand.
- It is important to encourage people to connect to fixed-route networks when possible. We need to find the best way to make microtransit gel with other parts of the transit system—including fixed-route, paratransit, and third-party services—and find partnerships to support those arrangements.

Coordinating and Consolidating Services

- The Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) is close to completing a microtransit feasibility study. Because RIPTA focuses on the entire state, the study is exploring the feasibility of microtransit/on-demand service that is community-oriented. There are opportunities for collaboration with nearby RTAs in Massachusetts, including GATRA and the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority. What are the best ways that RIPTA can use its existing resources, and what are the best pathways for utilizing third-party collaborations?
- There are a lot of services with specific eligibility (seniors, people with disabilities, people with medical needs, etc.). How can we break down eligibility barriers and provide more services as a one-stop shop?
- As an example of consolidating services, approximately twenty years ago, the Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA) stopped running school buses for high school students and encouraged them to use fixed-route transit. Prior to COVID-19, youth made up a large portion of LRTA ridership.
 - Microtransit might not be a good substitute for something that previously used higher capacity vehicles, such as school buses.

- It can be challenging to put together vehicle sharing agreements; insurance considerations can be a factor.
- It would be great if providers could blend funds from different sources to support transit services that may serve multiple rider groups, as opposed to separate services depending on eligibility.
 - State-level policy changes may be needed to make this happen.
 - How can dollars be spent in ways that minimize unnecessary duplication of transit service?

Other Notes

- The Federal Transit Administration is planning to [modernize and automate the National Transit Database](#). NTD data can make it possible to compare the cost of trips across modes.

Other Resources

- The Eno Center for Transportation has released [Mobility on Demand research reports and case studies](#). The center also hosted a webinar titled "[Improving Access for All: Bringing On-Demand Technology to Paratransit](#)," which is now available for viewing.
- MassMobility recently co-hosted a webinar about on-demand transportation with organizations in Maine, titled [On-Demand Community Transportation: Examples from Maine and Massachusetts](#).

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