

To: Asheville City Council
From: Transit Commission
Re: 2013 Annual Report
Date: January 2013

The past year was largely consumed with final planning for and implementing the first phase of the Transit Master Plan (TMP). This was a massive undertaking that involved a collective effort by City staff, the Transit Commission, First Transit staff, and many volunteers. This report will address these activities, progress on the goals established at the march 2011 Transit Commission's retreat, other highlights of the year, and anticipated activities in 2013.

TMP Implementation

Activities Prior to May 21, 2012 Rollout

- Commission members briefed each City Council member on the upcoming changes
- Held five information sessions in different parts of town to inform riders of the changes
- Transit Commission recommended and City Council agreed to make bus fare free for three weeks, starting with Strive Not to Drive and the first week of the new routes
- Recruited and trained numerous volunteers to assist riders
- The week before the rollout, City and First Transit staff, Transit Commission members, and volunteers worked at the ART Station in the morning and evening rush hours to hand out maps and help people learn their new routes

Activities During the Rollout

- City and First Transit staff, Transit Commission members, and volunteers rode buses and worked at the ART Station all day, every day the first week to assist riders
- City and First Transit staff increased phone capacity to handle increased call volume
- City staff and Transit Commission members staffed a Strive Not to Drive commuter breakfast station at the ART Station

Activities Subsequent to the Rollout

- As expected, the rollout was met with numerous complaints from riders. Many of these simply expressed a resistance to change, but City staff tracked all complaints and began identifying those that indicated real problems that needed attention. As a result of citizen comments/complaints, the following system adjustments were made:
 - o An additional bus was added to the E1 route, the most popular route, so that an E1 bus leaves the ART Station every 30 minutes
 - o The E1 schedule was adjusted to help it to remain on time during heavy traffic.
 - o Some bus stops were added or moved
 - o The S4 departure time was adjusted to keep it on time
 - o N1 began running longer hours some night due to funding from UNCA
 - o N was rerouted to come to the ART Station twice an hour instead of just passing through downtown at Pritchard Park
 - o C was adjusted to better serve Emma and help optimize its schedule
- Julie Mayfield and Dave Erb penned an op-ed in response to the wave of media criticism about the new routes that was published online by Mountain Xpress
- The City purchased two larger, used buses from Gastonia to add to the fleet
- Five new buses arrived and were put into use in December

Transit Commission Goals

At its retreat in March 2011, the Commission identified five goals, which it continued to focus on in 2012, especially the goal around TMP implementation. Below are the goals and a description of our work on them in 2012.

1. Increase Funding
 - Paul Van Heden and Julie Mayfield have continued to work with an ad-hoc group of multi-modal advocates to draft a white paper on funding options that should be final in early 2013. Our hope is that City Council and staff can use it as resource in seeking new and more permanent sources of funding.
2. Transit Master Plan Implementation and Public Relations (see above)
3. Strengthen Communication with Drivers
 - Regular meetings between the drivers, City staff, and TC members continue and provide a good forum to discuss and resolve issues and differences.
4. Advocacy
 - Julie's organization, the Western North Carolina Alliance, presented a transportation planning workshop in February.
 - Julie again served on the Strive Not to Drive (STND) steering committee.
 - TC member Dave Erb and City staff member Yuri Koslen, completed their Transit 101 presentation and did the first presentation to the Sierra Club in September
5. Integrate with other Transportation and Land Use Groups
 - Julie still attends the transit providers work group at the MPO, and she served on the transportation demand management study advisory committee. That study is now complete and a draft was issued in January 2013.
 - Julie co-chairs the GroWNC transportation committee

Other 2012 Highlights

- Based on rider complaints, we considered whether to ban smoking at the ART Station. After vigorous discussion, the TC did vote to ban smoking for riders and drivers there, but the City staff, which held final decision-making authority, decided to keep the smoking section in place but better enforce the ban on the rest of the platform.
- We considered whether advertising on bus shelters and benches was an appropriate use of that public space as a way to bring in revenue for the transit system. Staff agreed to draft a policy for our review.
- The drivers and TC member Tom Tomlin raised concerns about the abuse of bus transfers and the lost revenue to the system. As a result, First Transit and the staff agreed on a new color-coded method for transfers that should reduce the potential for abuse and make transfers easier for drivers to accept valid transfers.
- Julie, Councilman Gordon Smith, and City staff are fostering public-private partnerships to create two new bus routes and advance further implementation of the TMP. The first route would create a Health Express that would run from the ART Station through the Mission campus and to the new MAHEC campus south of Biltmore Village. The second route involves Biltmore Park, Western Carolina University, and Sierra Nevada Brewing and would run down Hendersonville Road to Biltmore Park, the new brewery in Mills River, and the airport. Discussions about both new routes are ongoing.
- We improved the solicitation of and response to public input. We have put a comment box at the ART Station, City staff and First Transit are now logging every comment that comes in through email or telephone (previously only emails to IRide were logged), and staff responds to all complaints that are addressed. Further, the TC receives a report listing the types of comments received.
- Since September, over 500 people have signed an online petition at Change.org asking the City to implement bus service seven days a week and more comprehensively in the evenings.

Anticipated in 2013

- The TC held its retreat in October 2012 and identified four goals for 2013:
 - Supporting further implementation of the TMP
 - Improving the rider experience
 - Maintaining communication with the drivers
 - Improving communication and coordination with the County transit system, Mountain Mobility
- We will have at least two new members in 2013 due to the resignation of Ken O'Connor and Paul Van Heden not seeking re-appointment.
- We look forward to ten new bus shelters, implementation of holiday service on several routes, and activation of the Automatic Vehicle Locator (AVL) system, which will let riders track buses in real time on their smart phones.

We thank City Council for its support of ART, and we look forward to working with you in the coming months and years to continue improving this vital element of the City's infrastructure.

Respectfully submitted,
2012 City of Asheville Transit Commission
Dave Erb, Vice Chair
Kevin Jenkins
Julie Mayfield, Chair
Ken O'Connor
Georgia Shannon
Tom Tomlin
Paul Van Heden