Marcela Moreno:

Welcome to today's episode of Next Stop Transit Tech, where we're speaking with Angie Jones from the Grant County People Mover about the implementation process for their new platform which allows their agency to provide real-time arrival updates to their passengers, track ridership, and provide passenger count information to their riders. People Mover provides curb-to-curb transportation that provides service to Grant County, Oregon Dial-a-Ride service and inter city service to Walla Walla, Washington, Bend, Oregon and surrounding areas. The Grant County People Mover provided 40,000 trips in fiscal year 2019 while putting over 260,000 revenue miles on the ground. So welcome. This is Marcela Moreno, the host for Next Stop Transit Tech. And today we have Andrew Carpenter on the line as well-

Andrew Carpenter:

Hello, everyone.

Andrew Carpenter:

Hello everyone. I'm excited to be back and I'm also excited to introduce Angie Jones, the district manager for Grant County People Mover. So, Angie, thank you for joining us for this episode of Next Step Transit Tech. And before we dive into the technology that we're talking about, could you introduce yourself and feel free to share your journey about how you got into the transportation field and what brought you where you are?

Angie Jones:

Hi, thank you for allowing me to join you today. My name is Angie Jones and as previously mentioned, I am the district manager for Grant County Transportation District, also known as the People Mover in the greater Northeast Oregon area. I am starting my 11th year with the transportation district. Prior to joining public transportation, I was a social worker and so working for another state agency that allowed me to have a lot of knowledge of like non-emergency, medical transportation possibilities, and other state run programs that the People Mover wasn't engaged in when I joined the program. So it's been an amazing ride in those last 11 years.

Angie Jones:

When I started with the people mover, the operation was much, much smaller. We had very short operating hours. We were open Monday through Friday, 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM. We had two services we provided, demand response and an inner city connection that was three days a week. So since that time we've explored and expanded our services and increased our opportunities dramatically. We now provide demand response services within the entire John Day Valley, a 30 mile radius. We're open Monday through Friday, 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM and Saturdays nine to four.

Angie Jones:

We have two fear-free deviated fixed routes that read Monday through Friday, seven to seven, throughout four of our local communities. We provide non-emergency medical services throughout the state. We travel into Idaho and Washington. We operate a veteran's medical transportation that allows us to transport all eligible Grant County veterans to any medical appointments for free, including into Boise, Idaho. We have added four additional inner city connections that run in all directions out of our community and keep us in connection within 168 mile radius. So our community plays a vital role.

So our agency provides a vital role in our statewide transportation network and our agency provides seamless connection to every corner of Oregon, also into Washington and Idaho. So our base of operations is in John Day, Oregon. We're located in central Northeast, Oregon. We are considered a frontier community. So that means that we have fewer than seven people per square mile, and our county is over 4,500 square miles with many those in the mountain terrains. We currently make connections through nine counties and 28 communities. We have stops at four airports, four Greyhound stations, two Amtrak Thruway stations.

Angie Jones:

We currently make connections through nine counties and 28 communities. We have four stops at airports, four Greyhound stations, two Amtrak Thruway stations. We make it possible for people to travel throughout the state and make connections to any final destination within the United States or internationally. That's a little bit about what we do.

Marcela Moreno:

That is a lot, but also a real asset to people living in Northeastern, Oregon, especially when you have living a little bit further away from each other, that transportation is critical, especially as we connect to the other parts of the country or just to our surrounding neighbors. That's really awesome.

Angie Jones:

It is. We have people that live within our county boundaries that are upwards of two hours from John Day, but we still get them where they need to go. It's very important.

Marcela Moreno:

That is a good segue into talking about the rider experience of the folks that you keep moving every day. So it's my understanding that you recently implemented a new solution focused on providing real-time arrivals to passengers, tracking their ridership. So providing all of those really great stats, go to NTD and what you shared with us today and eventually providing real time passenger load information. So if you could tell us a little bit about what operations looked like before you implemented your program, which I believe is Connexions, but spelled a little bit differently.

Angie Jones:

So you're correct. It is Connexions. Prior to implementing Connexions, our drivers did everything manually. They had paper manifest, they carried that manifest with them in their vehicles, wrote down the names of their passengers, the destinations, they wrote down how many trips that these people took, and there was a point where we actually had them counting cash and making change for bus tickets. We no longer do that, but all of these things have made it so much easier on the drivers. Our connection system is automated, so the drivers don't have to keep track of names or boardings or people getting off the vehicles. It's just really convenient.

Angie Jones:

Prior to that as well, we were not able to track our vehicles without using a cell phone application, which in our area being so rural cell service is extremely spotty and it wasn't reliable. So with the connection system, I'm also able to track vehicles, their speed, all of those things and our fleet is much safer for that.

Marcela Moreno:

That's great. It's a really great user experience. ~~Like~~ not only for the passengers, but for the drivers as far as streamlining just their jobs and making sure that they can get the information they need and saving them time.

Angie Jones:

That's correct. My drivers are very happy that we've switched to the new system and express no desire to go back to the old way of doing things.

Andrew Carpenter:

Did your drivers have any resistance to switching to the new system in the first place?

Angie Jones:

Initially, I have many agencies, some staff that are older and have some technological challenges. So that was the most resistance. We've introduced a few technological programs that assist the drivers and learning new systems is always a challenge, but as they've gotten used to it, they found it very helpful and it reduces their workload.

Andrew Carpenter:

That is great, and I feel like we should also have a separate conversation about that to talk about the right techniques for convincing drivers who might need some convincing, but that'll be for another day. So we'll call you back.

Angie Jones:

All right.

Andrew Carpenter:

That made us think of when it came to actually moving forward with this, when there was both the idea of you had been doing things the way you had been doing things. So what was the catalyst to get you to move forward, and what were some of those pain points that you were hoping to address that you just needed to address now, and what were some of the features that you were hoping to find when you started?

Angie Jones:

Okay. So as we have expanded and we're traveling in more directions, like I mentioned before, we're traveling within 168 mile radius. That's significant, and much of those miles are outside of our county. We needed a system that could help keep track of the vehicles for one, but would allow us to share information with other agencies in our area so that passengers could have a much easier time planning their trips and making connections. So we initially started with a software program to help dispatching, and because we do so many services, we provide NEMT, demand response, inner city connections would just do more than one thing. And there aren't any software programs out there that help with all of those that are rolled into one. There's definitely no one-size-fits-all, but the program that we're using to help with the dispatching just wasn't fitting what we do.

Angie Jones:

So we started looking for something else. I made connections with some folks up in Walla Walla, Washington, because they had a system that they were pioneering basically for regional services, for passengers and trip planning for regional services, and we got on board with that. I think they were a year into their program when we got on board and it's taken about a year and a half to get to the point where we've had the vehicles installed with equipment and purchasing the software. Finding grants took a bit of time because this can be very expensive. So that took some time and it took us about a year and a half to get to where we are today, but we couldn't have done it without that regional piece. It wouldn't be near as successful without the regional piece and these other agencies being involved.

Marcela Moreno:

So some of your partner agencies are also using the same software, so it's a bit of a coordinated scheduling process.

Angie Jones:

Right. There are more agencies coming on board with this program every day. So now a passenger can plan a trip. I was looking at the maps this morning and passengers can plan a trip from like Lewiston, Idaho to Pasco, Washington, Dayton, Washington, as far South as Burn, Oregon, on into Bend. It's just an amazing radius that passengers are now able to just look at one location, find their bus, find their schedule, see if that vehicle is at capacity or not, and plan their trips.

Andrew Carpenter:

And so that also means that your different agencies can communicate capacity across your different systems pretty much in real-time?

Angie Jones:

The passengers are able to view that information in real-time. They will look either at the website or the passenger app and load the specific route that they want to look at and that will tell them the information.

Marcela Moreno:

That's really cool, because I know from a passenger point of view the connections across different systems can often be something very tricky. So that's really great as far as passenger ease and also being able to communicate your services. Like it's not just our service area, it's our neighbors and we all work together to get you across from Idaho down to Oregon-

Angie Jones:

Right.

Marcela Moreno:

... which is expansive piece of land.

Angie Jones:

It is. It's quite a service territory, but it's really exciting to see other agencies coming on board with this, because really the information that you can put out to passengers, it's just so helpful. It saves on phone

calls to the office and dispatcher time. That alone is worth the investment, the time that the previous phone calls used to take. So I'm just really excited that this is taking off and doing so well.

Andrew Carpenter:

Based on that, what are your goals for the next year? Where do you hope to bring it as we go forward and now as things start to open up again?

Angie Jones:

Well, I am very hopeful that I will be able to talk connections into developing a program that integrates on the dispatching side, all of the things that we do. That's the only area that's lacking so far for us. And again, we are in a unique situation because we provide a great variety of services, but there is no program out there that's a one-size-fits-all. It's either for paratransit or it's for this, but nothing encompasses everything. So my goal is to talk them into developing that program. But on the passenger side, it's just to see passengers using the passenger apps, more locations like hospitals, clinics, grocery stores, social services, with the display monitors in their offices of the next bus arrival time at that location. Different things like that is really what I'm looking forward to.

Andrew Carpenter:

That makes me think. Do you all track the destinations that people are searching and the route connections that they make just to at least analyze how people are moving around on the system, or even make different planning decisions to do that down the road?

Angie Jones:

So I unfortunately I'm not able to do that from my end because I'm partnering with Valley Transit out of Walla Walla, Washington who owns the system and operates the system. So I can't do that, and I honestly don't know if they can. There is so much data analysis happening within that system that it is truly a possibility and would be very interesting to see actually, because so much data is being collected across like seven different transit agencies. It's massive.

Marcela Moreno:

That's what I think is so valuable about these systems is the ability to track things that were either anecdotal data from the past, like from operators and dispatchers, and be able to have that concrete number and be like, this is why we need to add frequency to this service or add capacity. So that's a great benefit.

Angie Jones:

Right. So on my end, I can track numbers of boardings at particular stops when routes are most heavily utilized times and things, but that greater power of they're trying to get from Pasco to Burns, that I don't quite have unless they're in actually right in my vehicles. That would be very interesting to find out if that is tracked though and if that data is available.

Marcela Moreno:

Yeah, definitely. I could see a lot of use cases for that.

Angie Jones:

Right.

Marcela Moreno:

One thing I'm interested about. So what process was used to select Connexions? I know you mentioned that the service is based in, is it Valley Transit?

Angie Jones:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Out of Walla Walla, Washington.

Marcela Moren:

Yeah. Out of Walla Walla. So what was that selection process like, and were you all involved in the procurement process?

Angie Jones (00:23:14):

So I wasn't involved in that particular piece of the procurement process. I was contacted by the general manager of Valley Transit when they were selecting. And there was like a focus group that gathered to talk about the areas and who might be involved in the program in the future, and the general manager at that time had a great vision. He called together people from literally everywhere and we were able to sit at the table and plan for what would come next once Valley Transit was on board and had their system going, what it will look like, where it could go from there and how we could use it in other parts of the state.

Angie Jones (00:24:09):

So like I said, I wasn't involved in the initial purchase. We were involved in planning, and when we chose to go with the Connexions system, we were ending our contract with this other dispatching software that just wasn't working for us and we were looking at the bigger picture of, because of the areas that we travel and the destinations that we wanted to add, what would work for us best, and regionally, this system seemed to fit the bill perfectly because we're able to plot things out specifically, but passengers it's just a one-stop place for them. And we do a lot of travel in, in Northeast Oregon. We do a lot of traveling central Oregon, Southern Washington.

Angie Jones (00:25:05):

So it just seemed to be the most perfect fit because it allowed the communication across the board, not only for us, which has been very nice, but for our passengers as well. And the group that is involved in this regionally, we communicate frequently. There were a number of meetings in the beginning. The connections folks came out and met with agencies multiple times to just give us the scoop about what was going on, what was possible with their program and then get us involved. So it was really nice.

Marcela Moreno (00:25:51):

That's awesome. So, I think partnerships between agencies and just between different partner organizations are so powerful, especially as you were describing, like you guys are constantly in contact for this project and before to transfer passengers and to communicate about your systems that at the end of the day are separate, but they do work together. So I think it's really great to see examples of that.

Angie Jones (00:26:32):

Yeah. I can say it's been a huge benefit, not only for us as an agency, but for the passengers as well. We can, them to the website, we can direct them to the passenger app. It's just all right there as opposed to them having to call like three or four different agencies to get the information that they needed.

Andrew Carpenter (00:27:01):

The folks who are less comfortable using smartphones or using the app, are they still calling in, and then if they do, are your dispatchers basically doing the same type of trip discovery within the office that someone would do on their smartphone just kind of guiding someone through it over the phone?

Angie Jones (00:28:04):

Absolutely. Absolutely. So, although it has decreased the number of calls that the dispatchers are fielding for these connections, we still got them. There are still a lot of folks who have a flip phone. They don't have a smartphone, but my dispatchers and myself, I take the calls as well. We go to the iTransit's actual website and we try to help the passengers plan those trips as best as possible. There are some things in that scenario that we can't help with, like ticket prices, and so we still have to give them the contact information for that other agency to find out ticket prices. Hopefully one day that will be melded into the system as well. But at this point we still do that.

Angie Jones (00:28:57):

We also have, a backend office that we can go in that has a number of features that are available that help us if the passenger say they're connecting from like the Greyhound and Greyhound is may be late. It helps us with the vehicle timing to keep so we're not leaving somebody stranded, and passengers tend to appreciate not being stranded. But yes, to answer your question, we do feel those calls, we do help them by looking at the system, both the backend system and the iTransit Northwest system.

Andrew Carpenter (00:29:44):

That's a really amazing point about the connections to even be on the other transit systems, but Greyhound or Amtrak and how those connections matter a lot, because that's well outside your control but you can still affect the passenger experience at least to a certain extent.

Angie Jones (00:30:05):

Right.

Andrew Carpenter (00:30:05):

And then that helps everyone. And so that's great that you're even focusing on that level of connectivity.

Angie Jones (00:30:18):

Oh, absolutely. We have that with our airport passengers as well. The Redmond Airport is one of the busiest in our area that we travel to and their flights of course are the same as buses. They can be delayed for a variety of reasons. There are some things that we can't accommodate, but I can't hold a bus for two hours for a flight that's delayed that long, but if it's within a reasonable amount of time, we're going to get them where they need to go but they will call us from the bus. They'll call us frequently from the plane and say, "Hey, my plane's running late. We'll be in at this time. Can you all

wait for me and pick us up." Typically, unless it's an extended amount of time, then we're able to accommodate that.

Andrew Carpenter (00:31:13):

That makes me think of, you know how car rental agencies they'll ask you for your flight number so they can see if it's delayed or anything like that.

Angie Jones (00:31:20):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andrew Carpenter (00:31:21):

Can you foresee maybe way down the line, but that type of integration with bus or flight information so that it's in a way people still don't have to call in or can call in even less because you just know that something's delayed?

Angie Jones (00:31:41):

That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that. I know currently with the system, the passenger that's on the airplane or on a Greyhound or the Amtrak could look at the passenger app and it will tell them real time how far away the bus is, the expected arrival time, but I hadn't thought about our agency being able to track that information on the passengers' behalf. That's quite interesting. Something to think about for sure.

Andrew Carpenter (00:32:18):

I have no idea what that would look like, but I thought that could be an interesting route.

Angie Jones (00:32:24):

It could be. So I'm going to make a note of that.

Angie Jones (00:32:40):

With public transit it's just really hard to accommodate extended delays because these inner city buses they're on a fixed schedule, but there is some wiggle room. There is some wiggle room, which is really nice. And thankfully, we're a small enough agency, although we travel many thousands of miles. We are a small enough agency where we really take into consideration what the passengers need.

Marcela Moreno (00:33:19):

I'm sure it's much appreciated to have that flexibility because yeah, to your point earlier, you can't hold a bus for two hours but maybe 15 minutes is within reason and that saves someone a huge headache on trying to get home or trying to get to visit family or whatever someone might be doing.

Angie Jones (00:33:39):

Absolutely. Because it's harder to find a ride home when you're three hours away from your home. But yes, the 15 minutes, we will make it work.

Marcela Moreno (00:33:54):

~~Definitely~~. I did want to ask a question because I'm curious about the implementation of Connexions. So what did that look ~~like~~ as far as installing equipment into the buses? Are there GPS trackers or tablets? I'm really curious about the connectivity issue. In a previous job, I know that was something that was a pain point for us.

Angie Jones (00:34:47):

Right. So implementation of the project, some of it was painful. For the most part it's been all right, but we chose to use tablets in our vehicles over the mobile data computers. It just actually worked out because of who our wireless provider is. Our wireless provider didn't interface with the Connexions MDCs. So we went with tablets and the tablets had to be specially programmed with the Connexions proprietary information. And then of course it's an additional expense, all of these tablets adding all of the data packages and all of those things.

Angie Jones (00:35:45):

So that was a little bit of a painful point as well for a small agency, but the company has been really easy to work with. It's been interesting at times because the home base for the company is in New Zealand. They have an office ... Yeah. They have an office in California and they've got a rep in Washington. So trying to connect between Washington, California, New Zealand, Oregon, and keep everybody on the same page, that was challenging at times, but it also affected like installation. So far we've got on our vehicles our tablets have been installed, which is our GPS, our passenger counts, our routes, all of those things.

Angie Jones (00:36:44):

We have yet to have an installed, but coming soon our monitors inside of the vehicles where we can play short videos that can have passenger information, all the traditional required signs like your Title VI and all of those things. So that will be coming in the end of April, 1st of May. Arranging, I would say arranging where all the vehicles are able to be in the same area at the same time for the installation is challenging. We don't have a large reserve fleet, and so most of our vehicles are on the road all the time. So that definitely is interesting.

Angie Jones (00:37:40):

Thankfully, the Connexions folks have been very accommodating and understanding that we're a small agency, we have a fleet of nine vehicles, this is what we've got. And they've worked with us really nicely. The pain point around cell signals, that can also be and has been challenging because again, like you had mentioned, there are areas where they are just dead zones and that can go on for miles. Thankfully the GPS still for the most part tracks in those areas and we're able to communicate with the drivers via a messaging system within that's in the program that is on the tablet. So that does help. Otherwise, we rely on cell phone communication with our staff, but that messaging capability has saved our bacon a timer too.

Angie Jones (00:38:47):

So some of the pain points again were the dead zones, working with so many people to have installation occur because the company needed to time it with installation for like Valley Transit as well and the kayak tribe in Pendleton to make it worth their time, worth their while to come to Eastern Oregon and install all this equipment. Our next round of equipment that's going to be installed with our monitors and things. The company has another install over in Corvallis, Oregon. So they'll come here first and then

go over to Corvallis to save that money, which I totally get, because it's quite expensive to be traveling all over to do this stuff, kill two birds with one stone kind of thing. Yeah, that's kind of the biggest pain points around installation was working to secure a time that met everybody's needs where I had, because my fleet is out of town all the time, having consistent or consecutive days that would allow them to do the work that they needed to do here.

Marcela Moreno ([00:40:18](#)):

Yeah. That's a lift, especially with a company that is around the globe-

Angie Jones ([00:40:25](#)):

Right.

Marcela Moreno ([00:40:25](#)):

... and based in New Zealand, coordinating that schedule is difficult.

Angie Jones ([00:40:30](#)):

Right. And they've been awesome. So we have Microsoft Team meetings on a regular basis where the guys from New Zealand are on, the gentleman from Washington is on, and if needed, the technical folks are on from California. So that's been really helpful to stay up to speed with both how they're progressing in their end and then what I've needed to do on my end to get our vehicles ready for these installations.

Marcela Moreno ([00:41:04](#)):

Very cool. On the front end or passenger facing side of that implementation, what was that outreach like? Because this service is a huge asset to riders, but it does also take the education component and kind of retooling how people used to book rides and getting them used to this new system.

Angie Jones ([00:41:29](#)):

Right. Getting passengers used to a new system is always interesting no matter what change you make. Sometimes it's met with a little bit of friction. Thankfully, we started out with the passenger education on a slower level, meaning that we let them know something was coming and then a little farther into it, we talked a little bit more about what that something kind of looks like. And then we introduced the concept of the app and the iTransit Northwest web face page.

Angie Jones ([00:42:12](#)):

And then when the passenger app was ready, we didn't do a full media assaults. At that time we just introduced us slowly, gave them an idea of this change was coming. Well, it's basically here now. And then signs, posters, we have a local radio show that runs on Mondays and Wednesday mornings where we can talk about all things transit and newspapers, grocery stores, all of those kinds of things helped get information to our passengers. We also reached out to the other areas that we traveled to and made brochures available at those bus stops and locations with the QR codes so that could just be scanned, download the app easy. Yeah, so it's been a slow process, but it's been successful.

Marcela Moreno ([00:43:21](#)):

Awesome. After a while it just becomes normal and people are able to show each other. I really enjoy the comradery that you can find at a bus stop if someone's very confused on how to operate the system or work a new app and someone else, maybe not so much in the time of COVID, since we're supposed to be six feet apart. But before the pandemic, people helping each other so that they can all use the system.

Angie Jones (00:43:51):

Right. And it's really interesting the span of ridership in ages. So we have seen an increase in the younger riders who are opting public transit as a greener method and their preferred method in addition to our aging passengers who are having to give up driver's licenses and those things. But it's really interesting to watch the younger generation truly assist the folks who might be struggling more with an app or even finding what bus stop they're at.

Marcela Moreno (00:44:38):

That's great. I guess that leads me to a follow-up question. In that outreach that you did around the launch of the system, were you all able to do any targeted outreach to populations that would be maybe a little bit more hesitant to adopting or adjusting to a new platform? Earlier in our conversation we were talking about drivers that are older and maybe a little bit more techno skeptical.

Angie Jones (00:45:11):

Right.

Marcela Moreno (00:45:13):

Yeah. What were some of your methods to help bring those people along this journey so that they can fully realize the benefit?

Angie Jones (00:45:23):

~~Yeah~~. So the app has rolled out during COVID, which has made it of course impossible to go to the normal places like the senior centers and things to visit because those places are shut down or have been shut down. They're reopening now. So it's been about our drivers having conversations with the passengers, flyers and brochures, conversations with the staff at the hospitals and the clinics to educate them on the app and how to use it and how to help their passengers that might be boarding at those locations.

Angie Jones (00:46:07):

The same with the grocery stores and the pharmacies. It's just been educating the retailers so that they can assist the people that they're seeing and our drivers as well, helping with the education because COVID has changed a lot of how we function every day. And of course nationally, ridership has been terribly hit, starting to come back now, which is nice. And it's easier to get to those targeted areas like the senior centers, because they are opening up here in Oregon. So we can go out and have those conversations in person. And we are having conversations with the veterans groups that meet here every Wednesday morning and the senior centers around the county that have lunches on different days, so that folks are able to hear more.

Marcela Moreno (00:47:13):

Very cool. And yeah, COVID has changed how we operate and it's caused us to pivot on how we approach working with vulnerable populations, especially here or usually where I am here as North Carolina, senior centers recently started opening up. But I think those conversations with drivers are key and it's like almost a back to basics kind of thing.

Angie Jones (00:47:49):

Right. Right. The driver communication has been crucial. Nothing could occur through the COVID situation without the drivers and the clear communication and being willing to have to pass out the information and have those conversations.

Marcela Moreno (00:48:11):

A connection just came into my head that we're sharing our appreciation for drivers, and today is Transit Driver Appreciation Day.

Angie Jones (00:48:19):

Yes, it is.

Marcela Moreno (00:48:20):

So shout out to that for today.

Angie Jones (00:48:24):

Absolutely.

Marcela Moreno (00:48:26):

And every day, because they're the first person and sometimes the only person that a passenger will encounter from a transit system like planners are behind the scenes. Dispatchers are largely behind the scenes. You might run into a supervisor if you're at a transfer station, but they're probably running around trying to handle something.

Angie Jones (00:48:53):

Right. Drivers, they're the face of the agency for sure.

Marcela Moreno (00:48:58):

Absolutely.

Marcela Moreno (00:48:59):

Earlier we were talking about grants and a lot of times that's a huge barrier to implementing new systems. It's like, okay, but where are we going to get the money for it? So I'm curious about the research process into finding grants that you could apply to acquiring the system. What was that like and what were some of the funding sources that you all looked at?

Angie Jones (00:49:34):

Okay. So, we like everybody else are highly dependent on our grants to be successful. My particular district does not levy any property tax. We are solely funded by grants and contract revenue. So out

here in Oregon in 2017, the state legislature passed a House bill that actually allowed for the first time in Oregon ever for public transit to receive a dedicated tax base and dedicated funding, first time ever in Oregon. And that actually was the tipping point for so many things for us. So that allowed us to operate our deviated routes which are fare-free, and expand services into a couple of different cities that we go to.

Angie Jones ([00:50:48](#)):

That grant has a few different components. There's a formulary fund that is a base that each agency throughout the state is entitled to. And then they have discretionary grants which are competitive. The discretionary grant, one of them is what helped us fund this project. Without that grant, we probably would be a few years down the road from being able to get the system put into place because the 5311, the 5310 5309, 5304, they all go to other places and they're needed in those other places. So, the state transportation improvement fund grant has just been a lifesaver for many agencies in Oregon, and that's how it's being funded.

Marcela Moreno ([00:51:44](#)):

That's great news. That's amazing for Oregon, because federal funds are so useful but having that extra revenue stream is pivotal to be able to do more creative, more experimental projects.

Angie Jones ([00:52:06](#)):

Absolutely. And these particular grants, the legislature put in certain requirements for them, meaning that a portion of the funding has to benefit low-income population, people trying to get to work, students. So there's just a variety of measures that we have to meet in this and our passenger app and the iTransit Northwest system fits in perfectly.

Marcela Moreno ([00:52:42](#)):

That's great. And one thing that I was thinking about is that with the wealth of data that you're collecting from your new system, I feel like it's almost like a loop, a really positive loop as far as you have this data to support to the state that you are helping students who are helping low-income communities, and it just kind of goes from there and you can acquire more funding through these grants.

Angie Jones ([00:53:21](#)):

If it becomes available, we certainly would never pass anything down.

Marcela Moreno ([00:53:25](#)):

Yes.

Angie Jones ([00:53:27](#)):

But they are discretionary. This portion is discretionary anyway. So it's competitive, and it's been really important to be thorough in the grant application process, really document why we need this, what we're using it for and how it's going to benefit. And then also they want to know what are our outcome measures and how are we going to ensure that we reach those and then reporting back. It's quite a process.

Marcela Moreno (00:54:03):

Yeah, definitely is. So when you were establishing your measurable goals, what were some of those? And I guess if you have any preliminary data, what is it looking like as far as reporting back?

Angie Jones (00:54:25):

So, because we're so highly rural, we wanted to be able to increase ridership. That was our biggest goal, increase ridership. And we've been very successful with that. Even with COVID, it's really increased. The two main routes that are funded by the formulary grants are fare-free. So being able to track the numbers from the demand response ridership that have converted over to these deviated fixed routes that are fare-free, it's been we've had an 80% increase in ridership because of that and we've had chunk of student ridership increase. Our student ridership right now for just our fear-free routes is averaging about 50% a month. It's amazing. And so we've been able to hit the increase ridership.

Angie Jones (00:55:40):

Another goal was to have bus stops in locations where low income housing is prevalent or where our low income families reside or low-income households. And when we did the route planning, we were able to make sure that we were hitting all of these areas and we have got stops at every single, one of those areas in four communities. So it's been great. We have high ridership from our low-income housing areas, high ridership, and we can tell where they're using it to go because of the way that the passenger accounts are in the vehicle. So they're using that to go to medical appointments, to the grocery store, to the post office, banking. They're using it to go to the senior center for the lunches and a lot of shopping, but we're able to track those and it's just been a highly successful program.

Marcela Moreno (00:56:52):

That's great. And what a win for the people living in your service area to be able to have the freedom to do all the things that you just listed? I'm a fan of shopping, but all the other things

Angie Jones (00:57:10):

Me too.

Marcela Moreno (00:57:10):

... going to medical appointments, going to the post office.

Angie Jones (00:57:15):

Things that we don't normally really think about. We get in our car and go, but people who are transit dependent, they have to work it around the bus schedule in our area which is a free service, or they have to use the demand response service, which is also very busy and takes time to get scheduled but it also costs. There is a fair associated with that. So, things that we take for granted every day and consider them small, even going to the laundry mat maybe, it's huge for passengers that are transit dependent and we're very happy and very proud that we're able to help them do these things.

Marcela Moreno (00:57:59):

And to do them more seamlessly with the trip planner that you were describing.

Angie Jones (00:58:05):

Absolutely.

Andrew Carpenter (00:58:52):

So my question is, do you have any advice or kind of starting points for other transit agencies who might be thinking about doing something similar?

Angie Jones (00:59:09):

Absolutely. Don't be afraid to reach out to your partners. Reach out to the other transit professionals in your area, whether it's in a different county or even if it's in a different state. Don't reinvent the wheel. Get the information that other people have and use it. There is always somebody out there who has some experience with so many things and we don't need to struggle individually to accomplish a goal. We don't need to do that. I know when I started with the district, I had no public transit experience. And I came on board at a time when our agency was so small and the previous manager was older and was very set in the way that things operated, and there was no vision for expanding, no vision for the future of what possibilities, what things would look like in five years.

Angie Jones (01:00:27):

So, think outside of the box. I know that, that's an old overused cliche, but you've got to do it. Think about what if you were transit dependent, even if you're not transit dependent, if you didn't want to have to drive to the next town three hours over and you could take the bus, what would you like to see in that vehicle, in that trip? What would you like to see with the information available to you, the technology available to you? Just reach out, don't be afraid to ask questions. There are tons of resources out there. National RTAP is fantastic, CTAA is fantastic. There's a lot of information, reach out. Don't reinvent the wheel.

Andrew Carpenter (01:01:24):

So kind of a flip side of it, but to ask in a positive spin, are there any kind of lessons learned that other people should be aware of? I don't want to say any like pitfalls to watch out for, but kind of ... Yeah. Let's just say any pitfalls that people should keep an eye out for.

Angie Jones (01:01:59):

What I would say is things from start to finish take time. Nothing in the transit world grant-centered is quick. Be patient, do your homework, don't give up. It can be frustrating if an application is denied one time. Resubmit, resubmit, because maybe it wasn't perfect for the group that was awarding projects at that time but maybe there was something higher on the priority list, but your grants is important. And the time that things take, don't get discouraged. It does take a while from the beginning of the grant to the completion of the project. It does not happen overnight.

Angie Jones (01:02:57):

It's easy to kind of lose sight of what you're trying to do because of the time, but keep that goal in front of you, keep your why basically in front of you so that you're reminded of the project, why you're doing it and what things are going to be like when it's done. So I think the biggest frustrating thing for me sometimes is time, how long it takes, but that's the nature of the beast when you're working in the grant world. You can't purchase it one day and have it installed the next. It just doesn't work that way. Not for us anyway.

Andrew Carpenter (01:03:43):

Excellent. These are all great insights for really everyone, whether you're running a transit system or not. And so, yeah. I appreciate that.

Marcela Moreno (01:03:59):

I echo your sentiments that, that's really good advice. There's so many resources out there and I know you called out CTAA, National RTAP. There's so many people that are more than willing to help, whether that's technical assistance or reaching out to another transit agency that has gone through a similar process. I think having these conversations and talking about what the pitfalls are, end up saving a lot of heartache and headaches for people.

I'd like to upvote your comment about always trying again for grant opportunities.

Angie Jones (01:05:29):

Thank you. And if your grant is denied the first go around, ask the people who scored it, where was it weak? Where was there not enough information and what else do they want to see? And don't be afraid to ask questions. The only way that we're going to get what we need is by asking questions.

Marcela Moreno (01:05:56):

Very true. At the end of the day, grant reviewers, people providing technical assistance, they're just people too. Even though you might only ever see their email more than likely-

Angie Jones (01:06:10):

Right.

Marcela Moreno (01:06:10):

... the person behind that email is in their role because they want to fund these projects, they want to help people and they want to make transit better, so.

Angie Jones (01:06:19):

Right. And in Oregon, we have our grants are reviewed. The state transportation fund grants are reviewed in a peer group. So there are transit agency professionals as well as state department of transportation, people involved in the grant review process. So it's not just one person making a decision basically. They have somebody that checks for complete lists and then they have the group that reviews for everything else. And thankfully in Oregon, these groups have always been really good at providing that feedback, and we have regional transit coordinators through the department of transportation that are super helpful and friendly and easy to work with. And I know that I can go back to my RTC and say, "Okay, so clearly they didn't like this. What was wrong with it? Where do you see me doing better? What can I do to improve this, because you know how much we need this funding."

Marcela Moreno (01:07:38):

Do you have any parting thoughts for the listeners of Next Stop Transit Tech?

Angie Jones (01:08:02):

Well, it's been a pleasure talking to you today. I really appreciate the opportunity. My parting words of wisdom, just go out there, enjoy what you do and always be thinking about what can be better, what can you do to make the passengers public transit experience better, safer, easier, more convenient, and don't forget about your staff. Do the same for them.

Marcela Moreno (01:08:38):

Yes, those are very wise parting words. So thank you for joining us. This has been really fun, a good way to close out a Transit Driver Appreciation Day and Thursday. So Friday.

Angie Jones (01:08:52):

Absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.