

Marcela:

Cool. Good morning, this is Marcela Moreno, transit technologist with the National Center for Applied Transit Technology

Andrew:

And this is Andrew Carpenter, the director of N-CATT.

Marcela:

And you are listening to Next Step Transit Tech, and today we have Scott Bogren, the Executive Director of the Community Transportation Association of America. And if you didn't already know, CTAA is the organization that operates N-CATT, and we're excited to have Scott here to talk a little bit more about the future and a retrospective on 2020, probably the most interesting year of my life. And I think a lot of people can probably say that as well. So, welcome Scott. Please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your journey into the transportation industry.

Scott:

Thanks Marcela and Andrew. It's a pleasure to be joining you today for the podcast. I'm Scott Bogren, I've been the executive director here at CTAA for the last ... just a little over five years. April, 1st was my five-year anniversary as the director. Previous to that, I've done just about everything you could do at CTAA. I started there in September of 1988, and my journey to the transit field and space is similar to, I think, many in that I never had any intention of journeying into this space. It just kind of happened. I was interested in writing, a journalism major. I had worked at a couple of newspapers and was interested in writing about stories and people that I was interested in. And I answered a job opportunity at a place called Rural America, which was a predecessor to CTAA.

Scott:

And in a couple of weeks from being hired, found myself riding small vehicles around central Pennsylvania, interviewing people and kind of talking to passengers and drivers and managers of these operations. And I will admit that I immediately felt like these were really interesting stories and that this whole idea of public transportation outside of major cities was one that very few people really understood, but once you got on a vehicle, boy, the value of it was so apparent. And to hear passengers say, "Geez, before this bus system, I hadn't left the house in six months and to realize the impact on people's quality of life that a ride could provide."

Scott:

It did lead me to believe that these were the kinds of stories I wanted to write about. I did that for a long time. When we became CTAA, I was the first membership director, I answered an 800 number, hotline of other transit operators that would call in many times just to see if somebody would answer. I've worked on federal grants that CTAA received, ended up being the director of communications, where I started to do a lot more work around transit policy and working with members of Congress and varying administrations, and from all that I sit here today with still in somewhat disbelief that I've been at the organization for 30 plus years, but at the same time feeling like I've never had the same day twice, and that the work and the challenges are certainly continuing and I still find them very inspiring to hear about what our members and customers are doing out there in the country.

Marcela:

That's awesome. And I agree that that is a story that we've heard a lot. That's the first question that we ask every one of our guests, and it's always really interesting to hear how people get started and then once they're in, they never leave because they hear the stories of how transit has impacted other people's lives and it's never the same day twice.

Andrew:

So, let's start off by taking a look back at pre pandemic times, what were some trends that were emerging among small, urban, rural, and tribal transit systems that may or may not have been upended by the pandemic?

Scott:

Yeah. It's hard to even think back to pre pandemic times, isn't it? It's like looking back at another world. But, Andrew, as you remember, the focus of the transit challenges, I think at that point, we're really emphasizing on demand technologies and kind of the way that varying forms of public transportation were working with the quote unquote disruptors of TNCs and kind of what we were learning about how to partner with TNCs and also how to deliver on-demand operations. And I think for demand response operators, which is the majority of rural and tribal, it was this transition from waiting periods when someone could request a trip to more on-demand, and on-demand, meaning as immediately as possible, because that's really how ... I don't care if you're in a rural or a tribal area or in Washington DC, we live our lives from a transportation perspective on-demand.

Scott:

We expect to be able to go and we want to go. And you could see a lot of systems at the time were grappling with that. Our smaller urban operators were developing partnerships with TNCs. They were trying to figure out kind of how that worked. There was obviously as well a large emphasis on simplifying the fare payment component of their operations, and simplifying it from the perspective of the customer. And I think that writ large is what you were seeing was in both rural and urban, whether it's fair payments, whether it's on-demand. It was trying to deploy technologies that made riding public transit more seamless and easier from the customer perspective and integrating varying types of transit modes, newer modes from bike share and scooters and other things into a seamless passenger experience. And it was exciting at that time to see this emphasis on how do we make this easier for a passenger, a customer? And how do we make it so that they can put these varying pieces together in a transit ecosystem in a way that makes sense for them?

Marcela:

That's very true. Thinking through what you had just said about scooters and bike share seems like a whole other world which is wild to think about. It was only a year ago, and I think maybe if I was thinking from 2020 to 2019, I wouldn't think that I was on some mysterious planet where we shared devices and walked around without masks on.

Scott:

It is hard to fathom, and those communities that I remember, I'd get a call from one of our member communities and they'd say, "Well, geez, Scott, the 2000 scooters just dropped into the middle of our town unannounced. What do I do with this? And to think about that kind of piece too today, I mean, it's a different world though. The world changed, our transit world changed, but the whole tenor of things

changed so much with the pandemic. The phrase everyone uses is unprecedented. And it really, it really was, and is.

Andrew:

I do get the sense though, that a lot of the trends that you've mentioned have not gone away since the pandemic started, but in a way, many have been kind of supercharged to [crosstalk 00:10:02].

Scott:

Yeah, I think you're right. The immediate aftermath of the onset of the pandemic, so let's think back to maybe from March, 1st to June, 1st of 2020, it was kind of shocking just to see so many systems almost virtually overnight shut down or significantly restrict services. And it was like I would go to my computer every morning and I'd kind of look through the overnights of the transit news and you'd almost kind of look away. It was disturbing to see that go on. And at that point, it was just kind of triage like, "How do we survive this?" And it wasn't until last summer, where you started to see as bad as things were, they've started to kind of settle.

Scott:

And then those trends that we were just talking about, Andrew, they started to resurface in different ways. And that was when we started hearing from our urban members saying, "I had some underperforming routes prior to the pandemic, and I'm concerned that post-pandemic they're going to perform even worse." And I've got some funding, rescue funding from the federal government to do some things, so I'm going to now even more seriously explore, maybe some parts of my service area are better off with me studying this in an on-demand way, as opposed to in a 90 minute headway fixed route from our urban perspective.

Scott:

And from the rurals, it was more of, "Well, geez, I need to look at contactless payments because that's the future." And obviously then there was just this massive rush from a technology perspective of onboarding as much safety and communications equipment and technology as one could as immediately as they could. So, it was kind of that whole piece, but you are right. The pre-pandemic trends didn't just stop. They maybe changed a little bit of direction and they're still with us now. And those same things that we would have identified at the end of a calendar year 2019 are now right at the top of the agendas for all of our members, as we start to look at, seriously look at kind of a post-pandemic world.

Marcela:

But going off of something you said earlier, Scott, about seeing members, whether it's urban or rural agencies responding to the pandemic, I guess it seems to have nudged people into a direction of implementing things that maybe weren't at the forefront until we started seeing ridership drop having to implement a lot of these safety precautions. And I'm just curious, so what are some of the examples of innovative practices that CTAA members have been implementing throughout the pandemic?

Scott:

Marcela, I used to ask people a question prior to the pandemic when we would do sessions on planning, and I would ask them, if you've been running your agency, rural, smaller, urban, tribal, specialized, doesn't matter, you've been running your system for a period of time, and you've gotten to know your

operation. The question I'd ask is given that if you could start over knowing what you know, what would you do differently? How would you deliver services in your community differently given what you know with the understanding at the time that you can't start over? Your decisions have already been made, your decisions, your operational and planning decisions are being onboarded on top of other decisions. And it would always engender a really interesting conversation. Well, I would do this differently.

Scott:

Well, the pandemic hit and everybody kind of sees services. And suddenly that theoretical exercise that we had was real. It's like, "You have shut down your service and you do know what you do know about your community and your operation. And I was always hesitant to say publicly anything about never letting a good crisis go to waste because people were dying. I mean, it's nothing to make light of, the pandemic is a very serious thing. Half a million people have died. We've seen hundreds of operators of transit systems, our own drivers pass away. It's a serious thing. And I was always very ... I try to be very careful about never rushing past that, but it did create in this void an opportunity, it did. And how to take advantage of that opportunity, given that that opportunity arrives with all sorts of negatives attached to it was out there.

Scott:

And I could hear that kind of inherent in the questions we were getting as an association from our members. And so the response is that you started to see were initially driven by ... this gives me a chance to right-size some of my services, and to pull back in some cases to offer differently in other cases. We've seen a number of our agencies went fare free or fareless during the pandemic, and now are kind of thinking through, "Maybe I want to keep this. Maybe this is something we need to make permanent," to which I've tried to say, "Well, you ought to really explore that. What does not charging a fair get you versus what is lost?" The fair collection revenue is the obvious thing that's lost.

Scott:

But, so there were those pieces. And then obviously, as we've always seen from our membership, there was this immediate innovation that they just started to dive into. And it's the best thing about working with our members is they're so flexible. They aren't afraid to take risks. And immediately you saw our members saying, "Well, I'm going to start delivering meals to people who are home bound. I'm going to start delivering groceries. I'm going to start delivering prescriptions. I'm going to come up with these ways to make my service relevant in my community at a time when I can't fill up the vehicle with passengers." And that was great to see.

Scott:

Frankly, I expected to see it, but I was still heartened by that response. And my thought process started to think through like, "Wow, if so many of our agencies," and I mean, from the urbans down to the smallest rurals and tribals, "Are making this change, it tells us that there are a lot of people that we serve on a regular basis that are homebound and that not only are they going to need help throughout the pandemic, but when we get to the end of it, and ideally a vaccine is available, we're going to have a responsibility to get these at-risk populations of older adults, people who have compromised health conditions, chronic health conditions, we've got a responsibility to get these people to the vaccine, because if they can't get food, they probably aren't going to be easily able to just go out and find a vaccination site."

Scott:

So, I'd say probably from early last summer, that was in the back of my mind. And I kind of also thought that as we enter the phase we're in now of the pandemic, we're going to see a lot of our members struggle with ridership, and that's tended to be the way we've evaluated the worth, the value of our services, look at all the rights. Well, we're not going to have that, but the next best thing my thought was is look at the role we've played in reopening the economy, in keeping people healthy and safe, and that is going to have to be something for us to kind of collectively hang our hats on in the interim period.

Scott:

So, it was quick responses. And then the other immediate response we saw was just the adaption of ... I mean, I remember early on, systems just sending an employee out to the Walmart and buying up all the shower curtains and as much duct tape as they could find to make those driver barriers, air barriers work. And that just, again, spoke to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of our members. They just did that right away. And that continues always, but those are some of the, I think kind of immediate responses that we definitely saw in our membership.

Marcela:

It's really impressive to see how agile agencies were too, the rapidly changing circumstances. I was one of those people who ran to Walmart and picked up all the shower curtains.

Scott:

Yeah.

Marcela:

So yeah, you do what you have to do to get people moving and to get them the things that they need.

Scott:

And now we've learned a lot in this period about and kind of redefined this whole nature of essential service. Hadn't we? We had ideas pre-pandemic about how essential our service was within the communities we served and that kind of thing. But for the smaller agencies, we've really seen that in obvious ways during the pandemic. When half our ridership sticks and continues to ride in the middle of a pandemic, it tells us that for those individuals, our services are absolutely essential. Or just as importantly, we're connecting people with essential work. And whether that means we're taking people to work at a local restaurant or at the grocery store, we all came to understand during the pandemic, how important those people were to us being able to get our groceries and food and how thankful we were that they were there and working with their masks, and again, in dangerous circumstances frankly. It was that whole essential piece will never be the same. We had theories about it, but now we've got, there's reality to it.

Andrew:

I think that dovetails nicely into a question I was planning to ask anyway, but you talked about how on coming out the other side of the pandemic there'll be some different concerns about having a ridership considering that is at least for now still the means of measuring the transit systems value. But from your view, what do you think transit system should start focusing on during the recovery from the pandemic?

Scott:

The challenge is to figure out as a leadership structure at any size transit agency, you've obviously made changes in the last 13, 14 months. And the challenge is to determine what changes that you've made were temporary and which ones you've learned, maybe ought to be made more permanent. It's kind of like what we were just talking about with systems that went fareless. You made that change. Is that something you ought to continue? The adaption of certain technologies, certain communications, obviously, the safety regimen. Prior to the pandemic, our definition of safety in public transit was driver training, it was really good maintenance of vehicles. It was all those things that went into the North star of public transit was, "It's got to be safe." Well, there's a whole bunch addition to what goes into a safe trip now, and it has to do with cleanliness, it has to do with things that we didn't consider previously. I think those definitional changes of safety are permanent. I don't think that riders, customers are going to countenance dirty vehicles.

Scott:

They never should have, but they're certainly not going to be moving to the future. And the way air moves through a vehicle, systems that have onboarded, these really great fogging technologies, all that's going to continue, no doubt. But what else operationally, what have you learned? And it's a really important moment right now, because if you're a small urban agency, you ought to be looking at figuring out what are the commute patterns going to look like in the future versus what they did pre-pandemic? What's tele-work, tele-health? How is that going to impact what had been normal ridership before? I try to read as much as I can about that, and you'll see economists saying they don't expect much change, maybe a 20% difference in the tele-work patterns.

Scott :

Well, that's one out of five riders if you're a system that's really dependent upon commuters, significant. We need to look at what a rush hour travel patterns look like in the future versus what they do now in urbanized areas. And then for smaller agencies, it's more as the types of services that you traditionally provided start to reopen, how quickly are you seeing that ridership return? And rural service prior the pandemic, we completely saw it becoming more and more regional, and longer trips, regional hospitals, regional trip destinations, regional employers, regional higher education, all these things that we're doing that there's nothing about the pandemic that's going to change that. It's probably going to make that regionalism even more of an issue for them. So yeah, there's a lot to take in and as a transit manager, the other thing you're grappling with is, well, the Congress and the administrations, both the previous one and the current one saw fit to invest \$69 billion in operating assistance to all forms of public transit with varying degrees of regulations along with these funding sources.

Scott:

So, another issue that they're dealing with that they never had to deal with previously is, how do I best spend these funds and in what fashion, which one's first? What's the impact on local share and in local economy? So, it's just there's a lot of issues that need to be sorted right now, so that when we get to the end game, and I think we're starting that period now, a system is really ready to thrive and can be kind of less responsive and more ideally proactive in the way it's managing how it serves its community.

Marcela:

Yeah, I think all of that's very true. And I'm just curious how things are going to look with a mixture of policies and procedures that agencies had taken up during the pandemic while coalescing with the pre-

pandemic trends that we talked about earlier, the contactless fare payment, the emergence and or re-emergence of integrating on demand transportation. So, I'm just curious, which trends do you think you're going to make it out of the woods after the pandemic and what do you think that landscape will look like?

Scott:

Well, I think both of the ones you mentioned are certainly going to make their way from before the pandemic, through the pandemic and out the other side. There's no doubt that in varying ways systems are going to look to do more on demand operations, and they're going to do that because their customers are going to demand it. And there's nothing about the experience during the pandemic that will change that, the contactless payments, even more so, people are going to want that and expect it. And so those will certainly ... The safety piece, certainly is going to go through this. And then the one thing that's kept a lot of those things from happening has been a lack of capital funds to do what a system wants to do. And we haven't mentioned it, but pre-pandemic, we were seeing electrification and bus electrification happening.

Scott:

And that was certainly an issue that we were starting to deal with. Just the politics that have all gone on during the pandemic and now with the new administration and there's an opportunity where we're going to see a significant uptick in capital investments for all forms of public transit. And there seems an obvious uptick in systems, in an administration, and really the American people wanting to see cleaner technologies being deployed by public transit agencies. Those are just obvious trends that can't be ignored and they particularly can't be ignored because the funding could be there to dramatically alter the landscape for these pieces. And at that point, we see almost the pandemic period as this sharp line drawn and there's pre and post. And it's really starting to look like that, the interest in public transit, the understanding of our role just is so different from December, 2019 to where we are today. From a political standpoint, it's mind [inaudible 00:33:49] how big a change has happened.

Marcela:

It feels like transit in the spotlight quite a bit. I'm personally thrilled about electrification, and while you were speaking, I was thinking how excited I am to see and hear electric vehicles on the road. And then I realized they're quieter than regular diesel buses. So, see and maybe gently here in the background.

Scott:

Well, it's new technology.

Andrew:

It's a very satisfying background.

Scott:

Yes, it is. And many of us who advocate and kind of work in the bus space, and again, I'd be the first person to say our business is not operating buses, it's moving people, but we use buses to do that. We'd seen a gradual decline in bus ridership for the last 10 years prior to the pandemic. It hadn't been obviously as dramatic as it was with the onset of COVID-19, but many of us had theorized that that gradual decline was because there hadn't been enough investment in replacing aging equipment with new buses and our partners at the bus coalition have some really great data that shows that there were

fewer buses on the road. So, of course the ridership is going to be down, and there were fewer buses on the road simply because there wasn't adequate investment to replace buses as they reached and went way past their useful lives.

Scott :

This is, again, this game changer. If we're going to invest in all of this capital equipment, I do believe we're going to see a dramatic resurgence in bus ridership. And it's going to be because as you just said, Marcela, those clean new vehicles are saying to a person in the community, "This is a real service. This is a service we've all invested in. I ought to try this." This isn't some sort of second class service with an old vehicle that looks like it should have been replaced a long time ago. Those optics are real. And it does signal, I think, a new era in all of this.

Scott:

And one thing from the bus standpoint we can't look past is buses are flexible. We've had to provide very flexible service throughout this pandemic and service changes from week to week, depending on where ridership trends are going, buses and bus operations can do that. They are built for that. And so I think we're entering into an era where the old fashion bus is really going to experience a resurgence because it's actually going to be the right technology and the right tool for how we want to move people.

Andrew:

CITI Lab, I think it was in 2019, they did a great series on the I guess our underestimation of the bus and its ability to do a lot of what we want to accomplish when it comes to moving people.

Scott:

So true, Andrew, we said for years leading up to the pandemic and we often talk to our members, asking them to emphasize buses our infrastructure, buses our infrastructure, and how great has it been to look at this current administration's infrastructure plan and see buses with this central role in what they want to accomplish. It's like getting echoed back what we've been saying for a long time and it's gratifying, but it's nothing more than an opportunity. It's no guarantee. And that's going to be all of our work to make sure that as all of this ideally, hopefully happens and we see the kind of investment that we've long needed in all forms of public transportation, and particularly in the infrastructure that it's deployed properly, that it's used in wise ways. I mean, that's a job that I'm eager to tackle. And I think all of us at CTAA are, but it is something we don't want to miss. It is a big opportunity, and we've got to land it.

Andrew:

With all of that in mind, what technology are you most excited to see coming out in the next few years?

Scott:

For me, it's to see smaller vehicles in the battery electric space. We've seen really good technology and improving technology in the 35, 40 foot articulated buses, big buses, but for a lot of our members that are operating shuttle vehicles and even in vans and minivans to see all those things become a battery electric and then to see the way we build a grid and a charging infrastructure all around the country to do this is probably what I'm most excited to see, because it's going to be probably the biggest fundamental change that I've seen in the transit field in the last 30 years.

Marcela:

Touching on what you've just said, and what we were talking about earlier is I think that investing in these technologies is a demonstration of an investment in community, an investment into our values and what we want to see for the future. Because to your point, the traditional narrative of a bus as something that has been a little rundown, and it's not your first choice. I think that the future, especially incorporating a lot of these technologies is just a demonstration from the highest levels of government down to local government, to transit agencies that we are investing in our communities. And these are the things that matter, having clean energy, having cleaner air getting people where they need to go efficiently and quickly and also safely.

Scott:

I agree with you.

Scott:

And in many ways it comes to this definition of community, right? And I like to think of community as shared space, and space that we all invest in and we all benefit from, and that could be parks, libraries, public education. It can be all sorts of ... But it also needs to be how we move. And I think that we can finally move away from the idea that the only person that rides a bus is someone who has no other options, and instead get to the point that people are choosing to ride a bus because it gives them more options, is that transition that I see we're moving towards in a lot of urban spaces. And in a lot of rural spaces, it allows those communities to stay economically viable. That mobility component does. And it's just important there too.

Marcela:

So, our final question, this is the last episode of our first season, so yay, very exciting. And we wanted to end on a big picture, which I feel like we've really been leading up to, where do you see public transportation as a whole in the next five years?

Scott:

My sense is that we will win back ridership, that the losses in ridership incurred over the pandemic will return. And I think if we can land the investment that we've all been talking about here, we will see greater ridership than pre-pandemic. And I am not pessimistic. I never believed any of the initial, "This is the death knell to public transit. No one will ever ride again." I never believed any of that and I don't think that to be true. I think the period we're about to enter is going to be one where in the urban space, the country is going to continue to urbanize. And I think the census will reconfirm that as a basic trend.

Scott:

And in that urbanizing America, people are going to want choices, and whether they want to get on a TNC in the evening, take a public transit to and from work, whether they want to on the weekend, hop on a scooter or a bike share, that a customer focused look at how people move is going to take root as opposed to a mode specific look. And we're going to have to redefine public transportation so that it takes into account ways that the public moves and that can be pedestrian, it can be all sorts of ways.

Scott:

And not just that meaning, well, public transit means it's in a 40 foot fixed route bus. Well, no. And I think that we're going to see that, and the use of data as kind of the new fuel in our industry to make better decisions, to drive decision-making is absolutely going to happen. It has to, because it's the only way to make rational decisions. And I think that we're all going to have to in the transit industry embrace to a certain extent performance metrics and measures that come along with this additional investment, that we have to understand that we've got to produce. And it's my hope that decision makers at the local, state and federal levels will start to understand that this broader sense of what public transit is can deliver outcomes.

Scott =:

And it's up to them to decide what those outcomes they need to get to, employment, health care, social determinants of health, improvements in the environment, whatever those are, that we can help create measurable improvements by this broader definition of public transit, that deploys technology in a common sense way that does it in a way that is ~~commuter... excuse me,~~ consumer or customer driven, that doesn't say to the customer, "Here is the system. It's been like this for 100, if you want to avail yourself of it, you've got to change your patterns to meet the system." And instead says, "Here's this broader network of a system that we're trying to make sure meets you in the middle as a customer, and allows you to make the decisions you want to make and how you want to live your life, and there are varying components in this that can help you move."

Scott:

That's not five years, it's probably a decade, maybe after I'm retired, but the point of it is to make the way we move around any community, as efficient as data-driven with performance measures, and also with all the members of the community in mind, so that the same level of service is there for communities with persistent poverty, as it is for communities where we're trying to develop white collar commuting patterns and that they're all treated as ... They may have separate demands of this new system, but that the system can meet them. And that's kind of my focus is, is trying to get our members situated so that they play an important role in that future.

Andrew:

Excellent. Well, thank you very much, Scott, for your time. We greatly appreciate it, and all of your insights into the industry and where everything's going. So, as Marcela mentioned, this is the last episode for this season, but Next Stop Transit talk, will be back soon with more episodes diving more into the evolving transit technology landscape. There are a lot of great topics that we have yet to cover, and so we have a whole list of people and subjects that we already are looking forward to covering. So, we'll have some great content again for you soon, and again, thank you, Scott. And we will be back.

Scott:

Thank you guys. It was fun talking with you today, and I appreciate the opportunity.