

Marcela:

Hey, I'm Marcela Moreno, I am the transit technologist with The National Center For Applied Transit Technology, or N-CATT for short. I am formerly a renewable energy researcher at Georgia Tech and then eventually became a transit planner at the city of Asheville.

Marcela:

My journey into transit, is, I've always ridden transit since... I think since I was in high school and I wanted to not be in the suburbs. So I would ride MARTA and Atlanta to go down into the city and go see concerts. I was like, "This is great, it's freedom." And also you felt very independent. For a 16 year old, you're like, "I'm riding a train by myself and I paid for it, all \$3 for it." But from there, I went into grad school thinking that I wanted to be a water resources planner, which is still very cool and very interesting.

Marcela:

And now I'm here at N-CATT as the transit technologist and host of this podcast, Next Stop Transit Tech. I'm going to pass over to you, Andrew.

Andrew:

Thanks Marcela. I am Andrew Carpenter. I'm the director of N-CATT and I have been at CTAA for three and a half years now. We are operated by the Community Transportation Association of America, so that's where Marcela and I work. And N-CATT is an FTA, Federal Transit Administration funded technical assistance center. And so the goal is to help small, urban, rural, and tribal transit agencies navigate the world of transit technology as it very quickly evolves, and learn how to apply these new things to their agencies and make it work for them. And so there are a lot of new tools that can help certain agencies move from using pen and paper onto more digital platforms to help ease the burden of scheduling trips, or anything like that. And then there are other agencies who have been working on implementing technology into their systems and need a little bit more guidance on what's coming next.

Andrew:

Our goal is to create resources through white papers, through webinars and through videos, and also through these podcasts to provide information about what technology is out there, the trends, and then also how to help those transit agencies make decisions about those technologies and apply them to their systems.

Andrew:

I started off in the transportation world, like a lot of people, by ending up here by mistake and picking up a writing gig as a technology reporter for Mobility Lab in Arlington, Virginia. And since then I have gotten super into transit and how it underlies the success of everything that people do. So if you have a good functioning transit system, then there's a whole lot that society can accomplish. And so the technology side is an important one as well, because you need the bones of good service, but then to be able to make life easier for your staff at the agency, and then also for your passengers to be able to use the system that you have.

Andrew:

And so one other thing that N-CATT does, is, we provide some in-depth technical assistance to individual transit agencies and then also state departments of transportation. And so with individual agencies, we do our innovative technology strike teams. And the idea behind this is, while we can't help everyone as much as we would like to, at the same time, we work with up to three communities at a time and help them figure out the technology that will address the problems that they are hoping to solve. So in Bloomington, Indiana, we are working with the transit system to help them deploy battery electric buses and develop a deployment plan for them. And then in upstate New York, we are working with a rural nonprofit that operates a rural system.

Andrew:

And they had identified technology, generally, as a need in their system. And so we helped walk them through the decision tree of how to arrive at the tech that would actually be helpful for them. And then, pretty much, we're getting them to the point of developing their request for proposals for that identified technology. And the strike teams really help with navigating the tech the people are trying to figure out. And then for the technology summits, we work with the state DOT's to identify what they want to focus on and then how they can support their localities throughout the state in discovering, or implementing, or procuring different technologies. And so, it's a chance to create the dialogue between the DOT and the specific agencies and help them see how they can help each other essentially. And so, these were very successful last year and we're hoping to keep doing that with the future years of N-CATT.

Marcela:

So excited to go and see people face-to-face, that will be the shining star of TA. Virtual is fine, it makes it accessible-ish, but you miss body language and people's faces.

Marcela:

I think that the work that N-CATT does, is really valuable in that continuing education, because technology in transit has come so far from TriMet and Google creating the first GTFS feed, to knowing where your bus is at every moment and the cropping up of micro mobility and micro transit all over the country. So there's got to be a way to keep up with that.

Marcela:

I think transit is a really unique intersection of environmentalism, of public health, of economic development, of equity and giving people opportunities and the freedom and independence to do the things that they want to do when they want to, when you have a well-planned system. So I think technology plays a huge role in being able to empower people to live the lives that they want to live.

Andrew:

That is too true. I was very much the suburban kid, got my license as soon as possible and drove wherever I needed to. And it wasn't until I went to college in DC and took the bus to go out later at night because this was in the pre-Uber days, so getting a cab was not easy from where I lived. And so then I realized, "Oh, this is cool." And then taking the train, I thought, "Wow, you can go so many places." And then after getting my childhood bike and bringing it to DC and riding around that way, I realized that, "Why would I ever want to drive around in the city again."

Marcela:

So you might ask, why are we starting a podcast specifically? Next Stop Transit Tech is going to be a podcast series that features transit agencies and their partners across the United States, specifically talking about their experiences with technology implementation projects.

Marcela:

This platform is to elevate and tell stories about the exciting developments happening in the transit industry and empowering other agencies with the best practices and lessons learned, that they can replicate at their agency. So what are some examples of transit technology? We'll be covering topics from integrating clean energy into transit operations, to artificial intelligence to assist with dispatch and scheduling, to the implementation of better data practices to help with reporting to the federal government or just internally to plan a better service.

Andrew:

And these podcasts right here, and these will help to share a lot of interesting stories about the cool stuff that all of your colleagues are doing. And I, Andrew, I'll be an occasional host on the podcast, but it is mostly going to be Marcela with you all, so I will hand it back to her.

Marcela:

Cool. I think Andrew mentioned something that's really important and key about starting this podcast, and it's the power of storytelling. This podcast series is going to feature transit agencies and their partners and feature some of the work that they're doing across the country on a lot of the topics that Andrew just touched on, just all of the technology implementation projects that happen behind the scenes. Like, you might see your local agency implementing electric buses, or that they have these cool digital signs, but there's so much that's going on behind the scenes at the garage that you don't necessarily get to hear the story about. And I think that this podcast is going to be really helpful for other transit agencies, state DOT's, for citizens that are just interested in learning more about how transit works.

Marcela:

And I think one of the really big goals is, so that agencies can hear what's going on, celebrate their peers, first of all But also be able to take away some of those best practices and lessons learned, to apply them at their home agency and be like, "Hey, I heard this really cool story. These are some of the things that I've learned from this podcast, from this video. And I really want to try this here." I think experimentation is so important in technology.

Andrew:

Excellent. So who are some of the people that we're going to talk to so far?

Marcela:

Right now we have interviews scheduled with CARTA, which is in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and their partnership with Vanderbilt University. Their goal is to improve access to public transit in Chattanooga, which is really incredible. And it's an interesting university and municipal government partnership. And another interview we've got coming up, is with Wecycle and the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority

in Aspen, Colorado/The Roaring Fork Valley in Western Colorado. They have a really great bike share program that's been operating since 2013 and we'll be exploring the interplay between the bike share and transit agency and largely just exploring micro mobility and how that can support ridership. I think that'll be a really important step in the future, as we recover from the pandemic and transit agencies are going to be trying to recover the ridership lost.

Andrew:

Indeed. And then hopefully in the future, we'll get to actually go to places to hold interviews and dive a little bit deeper into the implementations of different things. So one day we'll get to go abroad, and by abroad, I mean outside. So we're looking forward to that as well. We'll probably also pull in some other staff that works on N-CATT and then also at CTAA and other transit associations and technical assistance centers as well. So then that way, our listeners will have the chance to get a full spectrum of information about what's happening, both at the federal level and then with their colleagues throughout the country.

Marcela:

Yes. And if you're listening and you have a story that you want to tell and want to be featured, or have a story just in general, reach out. At the end of this podcast, I will provide ways to get in contact with us.

Marcela:

So the name, we came up with the name, Next Stop Transit Tech, because the first name we thought of was taken unfortunately. So Andrew and I were talking and we were trying to come up with a play on words for bus stop announcements. So if you're ever riding the bus and you pull the cord or press the push strip, you hear "Stop announcement." And every so often at a major intersection, it'll list off where you are. So yeah, Next Stop Transit Tech, because that's the next thing we're going to be talking about over the series of this podcast.

Andrew:

So Marcela, where can our listeners find us?

Marcela:

We are on social media and we also have a newsletter.

Marcela:

on Twitter and Instagram, you can find us at Transit N, C, A, T, T. And on LinkedIn and Facebook, so a National Center For Applied Transit Technology. And then our website is, www.n-catt.org. And that's where you can sign up for the newsletter for updates on events, webinars, new publications, and new podcast episodes.