

Marcela:

Hello everyone. This is Marcela with next stop Transit Tech. Today, we're chatting with a really great team of folks from the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority and WeCycle in Colorado. RFTA is an agency that operates public transportation for the Roaring Fork Valley in Colorado. And WeCycle is a not for profit organization serving the Roaring Fork Valley with bike share through a private public partnership.

Marcela:

We're really thrilled to have Mirte, Dan and David with us today. And they can explain everything I just did much better because they're the folks doing the work. So, welcome. If everyone wants to introduce themselves and also share a tidbit about how you began your career in transportation.

Dan:

Well, I'm happy to start. My name is Dan Blankenship, and I'm the CEO of the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority. I got started in the bus business in 1981 in Durango, Colorado. I had been working for the area agency on aging for a couple of years, and working with senior citizen organizations to develop home health, home chore, recreation, nutrition, and transportation systems. The city of Durango decided that it wanted to be a destination resort and it needed a transit system, so I applied for the job and I got hired primarily because I had some grant writing experience and grant management experience. In that job, I drove buses, I fixed buses, I put chains on buses, I fueled buses, plus did all of the administrative work, the hiring and the firing and the training and that sort of thing. So, I really got a lot of experiences, in terms of what it's like to be a frontline employee and what it's like to be in administration.

Dan:

I bailed out of that for a couple years, then I went to work for a management firm, ATE Management Services that managed transit systems for transit agencies across United States. I got a job in Waukesha Wisconsin for a couple of years, managing their Waukesha Metro Transit. And then that job led to being offered a position to work at the Roaring Fork Transportation Agency, which was the predecessor organization of the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority. I started there in September 1989, and I've been there ever since. It's been a wild ride working to develop our regional transit services that now operate in about a 70 mile quarter from Aspen to Glenwood Springs, in the Highway 82 quarter, and from Glenwood Springs to Rifle, Colorado in the quarter. Pre-pandemic, we hit a high ridership number of about 5.4 million passengers. We had a successful property tax election in 2018 that provided funding for bus replacements and a lot of capital projects and a bike share expansion. So we're really excited to move that effort forward, and I'm happy that we're here and able just to talk a little bit about what we're doing in our region.

Marcela:

That's really exciting stuff.

Marcela:

Putting chains on buses, something that I haven't thought about, but that sounds like a lift.

Dan:

It was a great experience. It really was. And it gives me some empathy for our frontline personnel, especially people who are driving buses in a mountainous region on highways that it very slippery, and when they're dealing with our highest passenger demand and so forth and a lot of distractions. And because I've done that myself, I know what they're going through, and we try to do everything that we can to keep it safe for them.

Marcela:

Yeah, that's great. It takes a lot of talent. I have a lot of respect for operators.

David:

I'm David Johnson, I'm the director of planning for RFTA and I was just doing the calculations while Dan was speaking. I've been in the transit field, I just can't believe it, for 25 years now. Time flies. I worked for the Federal Transit Administration route in eight in Denver. I have worked for a very small paratransit agency in Minneapolis, and most of my time has been spent working for transit agencies in the mountain communities. I think was, in that area, was with Eagle County Regional Transportation Authority, right next door. When they were interviewing, they set up phone interviews and I said, no, I'm going to fly out there. I'll meet both out there. I'll get out there one way or the other for the interview. I did that, and didn't offer the job. But then the person that they did accept quit two weeks later, and so I was second in line, but whatever it takes. It's been 25 years, and I've just been so, so pleased to be in this profession and particularly to be working with RFTA. I just can't say enough. I'll leave it at that.

Marcela:

Awesome. What a journey. That resonates with me because when I got my job as a service planner at the city of Asheville, they told me I didn't get the job at first. And then they called me a week later and they're like, actually, the person we offered the job to said no, so I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but we're offering you the job now. And I was like, "I'll take it." I fully understand the sentiment.

Marcela:

It's just how things happen. And you're like, this one thing happened, and it changed the course of my life. So I'm glad that that person did not take or did not want the position, and it worked out really well. And here I am.

Mirte:

That's an excellent segue here. Here I am. And of course, the events that changed the course of my life for riding RFTA as a child. My name is Mirte Mallory, and I'm the co-founder and executive director of WeCycle, the ride for valleys, nonprofit bike share owner operator. I grew up here in the Roaring Fork Valley riding the bus service that Dan Blankenship was operating. Soon, David would be planning for, and grew up very fortunately on the bus route and had the choice as a child was, you want to go somewhere, you have RFTA, you have your bicycle, or the school bus or your two feet of course, and felt very lucky that it was part of our values as a community and as a family, that I had the independence and freedom of getting around this Valley on the bus primarily, and then connecting it to my own personal bike. Years later, I came back to the Valley as a young adult, and in my late 20s, was serving on the Pitkin County Planning and Zoning commission. We were working on our reach to some of several of our regional planning documents.

Mirte:

One included the Aspen Scenario Community plan. And in that process, there were lots of initiatives to improve our transportation network, to enhance our multimodal transit services, to reduce our carbon emissions and be the environmental steward we aspire to be as a Valley. I was working on the planning phases of this document, felt compelled to be part of the action items, the 200 plus action items that were ended in the document. I said, it is my responsibility, I'm living in this Valley, and such a privilege to live here, to give back in some way. And having seen the share coming to life in European cities and in a few cities within the United States, so here's an opportunity for us to create connectivity between RFTA's extensive network, which provides unbelievable breadth of service and reliability and access and independence, but also most importantly, a way of getting around without a vehicle.

Mirte:

Now, we have an opportunity to connect bikes to that same service, let's start a bike share system. So I came about joining the transportation service through passion. I'm a collector of passion for the community and the opportunity to help us pedal our values into action.

Marcela:

Pedal our values into action. I love that. But yeah, it's so true, especially thinking about the amount of independence it provides, like growing up, being able to see your friends and meet up. For me, it was of them all, like meeting up at the mall. Yeah. I think it's really great when you have that transit access, it's reliable and it provides a lot of choice to getting around, especially at a young age. I feel like it sets the stage for the rest of your life, that this is an option.

Mirte:

I couldn't agree more on, I think it's so critical to how we look at how to increase transit adoption, that we really focus on the young generation and instilling patterns in behavior of being transit users at a young age, because you learn the flexibility that provides the independence, but you also learn to navigate systems, and read timetables, and deal with fares and interact with people. I'm really grateful as the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority made that easy to do it, and I felt like I could get around where I needed to in a safe way, and you feel like you're part of a bigger system, and hope we can all inspire that by making our systems easy and safe for kids as well. If you don't learn the behavior early, it's hard. We all know how hard it is to change behavior. So let's instill transit ridership when we're young and in our formative years.

Marcela:

It's like learning a language. It's better to learn it when you're young and keep it up, and I totally agree. In your introduction, you were mentioning wanting to turn your planning into the action items and being part of that process. That leads me to WeCycle is the first bike share outside of a major metropolitan area. Could you give us a little bit more background on how WeCycle was founded, and who were some of the stakeholders at the table?

Mirte:

We founded WeCycle in 2010, and really the impetus had been seeing bike share having a transformative role in major cities, both in Europe and in the United States, very few at the time. My husband and I felt inspired to start an initiative within our community that helped us realize our community values and our aspirations, many driven from the Aspen area community plan, which had

transportation reduction goals of reducing our vehicular miles traveled, improving the transportation landscape and reducing the congestion. We are a small Valley rural community, but we have big city traffic challenges. I think as everyone concurred as the raft of bus drivers, would echo to a great degree. We live in a community where you do sit in lines, wait in traffic and congestion and vehicular travel changes the character of our community. And so with this, the values of our Aspen area community plan, along with the environmental goals of reducing our carbon footprint by significant levels, we felt there was an opportunity to introduce a carbon free mode of getting around our communities and connecting to the bus service.

Mirte:

And so, we found it looking at other models around the country, and inspired by many Denver, nice ride Minnesota, for the Minnesotans is on this call, and looked at that opportunity, found that part of one of the goals of the Aspen area community plan was to foster public private partnerships and collaborations between local, regional governments and also nonprofits. And so, we saw this as an opportunity for working collaboratively and in partnership with the private sector, or the public sector and through local community initiative to bring bike share first to Aspen, and eventually expand within the Roaring Fork Valley. And in doing so, recognizing that our primary goal again, was a transit service to provide connectivity to and from the long haul, fixed route service being provided by RFTA. And first and foremost, not to be a recreational service, it was critical that our first partner be our transportation authority. And so Dan got a phone call from an innocent young aspirational young woman, "Hey, Dan, what do you think about starting a bike share service?" Bike share was very new at that time, there were probably a handful in the United States, none in our regional area, "But Dan, this really could transform our region. Do you mind a few minutes of your time to connect on this concept?" And little did Dan know it would be now over a decade of continued enthusiastic conversations of, what could we do together? And what can we do together? And Dan very graciously listened to the opportunity, saw the alignment, and encouraged, through his leadership, his board or RFTA to join WeCycle as its first founding partner. RFTA, coming on board as WeCycle's first, leading, founding partner, helped to inspire the way for other jurisdictions and private partners to follow. And as a result, we brought the organizations together through investment, both for capital and operations from the public sectors, the jurisdictions within the Valley, but then many of our leading businesses and organizations, nonprofits, and businesses to collectively lead through the community towards more sustainable transportation alternatives.

Mirte:

But RFTA's leadership as our first founding partner, inspired other jurisdictions within the Valley to follow. The city of Aspen joined as well as Pitkin County.

Mirte:

And then from a private sector standpoint, we were very grateful to have the Aspen Skiing Company, the Aspen Institute, the Aspen Meadows Resort, again Shaft Kramer, the Aspen Valley Hospital, the Nikita Wolf Foundation and the Myers Roberts Collective, who collectively came together to help provide the seeds and the foundations for this organizations to begin rolling in the spring of 2013 with 100 bicycles and 13 stations, and the rest is history.

Marcela:

Wow. That is a collection of folks to kick this off. RFTA was the trend setter, it sounds like that's really amazing to bring together all those different groups over a collective goal, to improve mobility for the region. Everyone saw that vision, it was like, yeah, we're going to get in on that. That's awesome. I want to hear a little bit more from Dan and David from the RFTA side, when you were approached by Mirte, what were some of the ideas going on in your head, and what's the partnership from your point of view?

Dan:

Well, when I got that call from Mirte, I said, bike share, what's that? The model initially, because it's starting out and resources are scarce, you have to be able to demonstrate to people that it's workable, but you have to make a lot of concessions, I think, in the beginning phases in order to get it off the ground. So I initially think there was going to be a fee for a riding it, people had to pay. And so I thought, well, they're paying fare from Glenwood Springs to Aspen is \$7, but they can get that down to maybe \$5.50 with a discount pass. And then if they have to pay to ride the bike from Ruby Park to wherever they're going, the music tent or the hospital, or some other business, that could add up. But ultimately, Mirte was able to persuade some of her supporters to provide the resources so that she could make the first 30 minutes free. I think that that really unleashed the potential of bike share for people.

Dan:

And if they go over that 30 minutes, they have to pay, but the price could be pretty steep if they went way beyond that. The purpose of having the fee is so that WeCycle isn't competing with the bike shops that do the more long-term rentals and so forth, and it's also keeping the bikes available for others users. But one of the big issues that we have, because we were, if not the first, one of the first transit agencies in the United States to put bike racks on buses, we designed our own, and we could carry four bikes on a bus. We soon found, and we allow passengers ride the bus for free and put their bikes on the bus for free, but you had to pay the fare for themselves.

Dan:

We soon found that the demand for that space on the bike racks exceeded our capability of leading it, and we had some locations where we got a bus coming up Valley. So, we put a fare in place of \$ 2, and people could use their discounted pass, and that would bring the price down. But bike users kind of resent that because they're going, hey, we're doing the right thing here. We are trying to think about the economy or excuse me, the environment. We are trying to be healthy and good for air quality, and now you're charging us for doing the right thing?

Dan:

So, that's been a little bit of a sore spot. I think we realized that at some point, we recognized that people want to take their bikes with them and they want to ride around the mountains up in Aspen, and there's a lot of great trails up there. If they could take their bikes up and leave them there for those kinds of mountain biking trips, but they could get to the station by some other means and leave that bike at the station, then it just provided more capacity in our system. I think that's the real beauty of bike share, is that people can access transit on a bike that shared, docketed at the station, hopped on the bus, go to their destination, hop off, get on another bike, share, go to wherever they're going, their job, or some recreational event or something like that. And if they want to, they can have a bike stashed up there that they could use during their lunch hours, right up a mountain trail. Now, with the advent of the e-bikes and so forth, I think it's

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Dan:

... even more exciting and will generate more interest in bike share and more enthusiasm as we start to infuse e-bikes into the system and also expand our bike share to Carbondale and Glenwood Springs. And then it's already operating kind of in a pilot program in Snowmass village. And then another RFTA member is Newcastle. And if we could get everybody that's a member of RFTA set up with a bike share system, then we can reduce demand at park and ride lots for car spaces because they're expensive and nobody likes park and ride lots. And we can create really a kind of a fun way to get to and from transit and encourage more people to get out of their cars.

Marcela:

Very true. I didn't think about the capacity issue on bike racks especially if there's a lot of mountain bikers that are riding on the trail. And a little side note before I worked in transit, I was always very afraid of mounting my bike on bike racks because I was like, I'm going to hold the bus up and everyone's going to be mad at me. So I can see from the perspective of another person who is also afraid of the bike racks, to be able to leave your bike at a docking station is a huge relief.

Dan:

It helps the practice a few times. I think once you get the hang of it, it's pretty easy with the newer racks that are mounted fairly low and you just lift them up, and there's a little hook that you put over your tire.

Mirte

Interestingly, you were just mentioning how it takes practice to load your bike on a bus. And that kind of barrier of entry at first can feel daunting as you are describing Marcela. I think the same is for bike share is that those first few rides kind of the uncertainty of how do you sign up? How do you check a bike out of the dock? How do you check it back into the dock and ensure that the clock has ended and that the bike is securely returned. That also provides kind of a period of uncertainty anxiety and it takes a few seamless rides and easy rides to become familiar with it. And then to discover how quick and fast it is compared to perhaps loading your bike or locking your bike up at a bike rack. And the other opportunity that we've seen a lot of synergy with RFTA, is that the bike real, a bike share given we have bike share systems at different ends of the RFTA service area is that it's the first and the last mile.

Mirte:

So many individuals would want to hopefully ride your bike to the bus and then take the bus to your destination. And then you want the flexibility of having a bike perhaps in the town that you work to quickly go to lunch or run errands, but to have a bike either in both places or two, you don't want to take your bike on the bus that's why bike share gives you a bike where you want to be when you need it. So you have one in each community and that you're able to come and go at your flexibility on your schedule as you need has been. We've seen a lot of those synergies of people riding to the bus, hopping on the bus and then getting on a bike at their destination again. So truly closing the loop and a full bike bus ecosystem that we worked really diligently together to create.

Marcela:

That's great. Especially with those first 30 minutes being free, that should cover I think the bulk of first and last mile trips. And it's nice because you don't have to worry about parking. You don't have to worry about taking your car to work, or if you're like, Oh, I walked to work and now if I go to lunch, like it's a little bit far. If you have a bike to fill that need, then you're all set. And that actually tees up the next thing that I wanted to talk about, which is the planning of locating where the docks are. I was curious about the coordination between after and WE-cycle, as far as picking locations that were mutually beneficial and maybe some of the characteristics that you all were looking at when I guess not placing them. I'm thinking in my head SIM city, where you just plop it down where you were constructing them.

Dan:

Well, what RFTA has been doing to this point in time is investing in a bike docking stations at BRT stations at Ruby park and Mirte has been reaching out to the community and involving the public in each jurisdiction and trying to determine those locations where there's going to be the greatest potential for people to want to use a bike. And so she's done her best to cite those docking stations in convenient, high traffic areas.

Dan:

I was looking through her 2019 annual plan last night in preparation for this meeting. And it's so beautifully done and so easy to read and to understand and so professional and that's how she's approached this from day one.

Mirte:

I'm Humbled. And that's very kind of you Dan, but I perhaps in the hub and we're all the spokes that make this wheel roll in true. And we need to have that collective buy-in and different. We all contribute to the success of this system together. And I'm very humbled by your kind words. Thanks for providing the funding so that we can continue to grow. And as Dan just said, unfortunately, as we continue to gain adoption and new innovations come forward, that will require more resources for us to continue to respond to the demand and to these opportunities to enhance the service levels and remain at the forefront of what the bike share offering is, and to inspire more behavioral change and getting more individuals on bikes and buses. So as part of that, Dan mentioned that BRT stations, so we're critical to this kind of stations. And I think it's important to underscore that WE-cycle launched in the spring of 2013 concurrently with RFTA launching the first bus rapid transit system for a rural area in North America. And so we had these two very pioneering systems coming online at the same time, both of which were complimentary in providing a truly seamless enhanced multi-modal transit service for the residents and visitors of our region. And in order to make those connections effective, priority of all of ours was that we would have significant docking stations at every BRT stock. And the vision would be eventually throughout the Valley, but initially in the service areas of the bike share service areas, and RFTA has been an instrumental funder of those stations.

Mirte:

And then we work collectively, as Dan mentioned with other partners, private and public throughout the communities to provide the feeder station so to speak from those bus rapid transit stations. And so this day, just this past year, 50% of all of our arrivals and departures on bike share, originate or end at a BRT bike share station. So truly those stations are the hub of our systems. And from those stations people are either embarking to places of employment, where they live, recreate, going to run errands, to events, or people are arriving from those various locations and hopping on a bus to a different location.

And so that will be one of the guiding principles as bike share continues to grow throughout the region is to focus on the BRT stations as the launching pad throughout the community.

Dan:

Our bus rapid transit system which we've named VelociRFTA-

Dan:

Operates between Glenwood Springs and Aspen and the highway 82 quarter. And it serves the communities of Carbondale eligible in the mid valley, the Willits which is a mixed use development. Basalt, we have a transfer station at Brush Creek Road, which is about six miles from Aspen and six miles up to Snowmass through a small mount pass. And then we have one at the Aspen airport business center, one at the Buttermilk Ski Area, which also has some affordable housing that's situated in close proximity. And then our terminus is that Ruby park transit station in the downtown area of Aspen. And so it's a limited stop service. We have bus HOV lanes for about 20 miles of our route from Basalt up to Buttermilk Ski Area.

Dan:

We have from the airport business center, which is about three miles outside of Aspen exclusive bus lanes that we can use that give us an edge on traffic, because Aspen from Buttermilk into town, which is a distance of about three miles is a two lane highway, so that it necks down from a four lane highway to a two lane highway at Buttermilk. And that creates a tremendous amount of automobile congestion during peak hours, especially during peak winter season and the summer season. And it could take somebody 20 plus minutes to make a three mile trip to get into town. Meanwhile, the buses can get in there in five minutes, so people in the cars can see all the happy people reading their newspapers or talking on their phones or their iPads was in by then. And so it provides an incentive to get more people to use transit. It makes us more efficient and our system is all about trying to reduce the travel times, which now we've gotten down to about an hour and five minutes between Glenwood Springs and Aspen. And that's a distance of roughly 40 somewhat miles.

Marcela:

That's really incredible. Having been to Glenwood Springs, I didn't explore a lot out of town, but now I wish that I had gone on the BRT route. So I guess I'll have to come back soon someday.

Dan:

Our BRT station is located on the South side of town at 27th street, and it's not downtown, which is kind of the nexus of the I-70 quarter and the highway to two quarter and the Grand Avenue bridge going across Colorado around river. It helps you access I-70. But we are working with the city right now on a plan to extend our BRT service from 27th street, potentially through the downtown area to West Glenwood Springs, where we have a park and ride facility and where our Glenwood Springs maintenance is situated now. And when we do that, then people can travel from Snowmass or Aspen, go down to Glenwood Springs, dine, go to the Hot Springs, there's the caverns.

Dan:

They can take a gondola up on the hill and ride a bunch of amusement rides. They can go on raft trips and those kinds of things, and hop back on the bus and get back to Aspen or Snowmass. Or if you're in



Glenwood Springs, then you can explore other parts of the Valley and the beauty of bike share is that you don't have to bring a bike with you. You don't have to bring a car with you. You can ride Amtrak, you can take a bus, you take a plane get to your destination, and then use our local transit system, and then to explore these communities on bike share. And I think it would be fun and a real boon, total local economy when we get the system all put together.

Marcela:

Yeah, that's a beautiful vision of mobility. I'm imagining it in my eyes and I'm like, it sounds wonderful. Also knowing the backdrop of the Roaring Fork Valley and the mountains and the river. I'm like, it's just perfection. I'm going to daydream a little bit about it later. I have a bit of a technical question. How has RFTA been able to measure bike share trips that would be characterized as first and last mile trips?

Dan:

Well, I refer you to actually, to Mirte and to, I was looking through her annual report. ~~She's done a really good job.~~ And as she said, of all the bike share trips that are made in the WE-cycle system, 50% of them have kind of an origin, I think, or a destination of a bus rapid transit station. So you would have to look at her numbers to figure out what kind of numbers there are people doing that. And right now compared to 5.4 million transit rides or millions and millions of car trips on a highway, it's a pretty small percentage. But the system is in its infancy really, even though [could you insert a clip of Dan saying WE-Cycle here] has been working on it for a decade. We're just now getting to the point where I think we're getting the local support to expand it throughout the region, with more stations, with more bikes, with e-bikes and so forth and make it more accessible to a greater number of people.

Dan:

And then I think we can really start seeing it make a difference. And I'd like to get David Johnson in here who deserves a tremendous amount of credit. He served on WE-cycle the board of directors for awhile. He's an avid biker himself, but he's also a grant writer extraordinaire. And he has done so much work on RFTA behalf to garner resources, to help us buy buses, to help us build facilities and those kinds of things. And he and his planning team will be working in the years ahead to acquire more funding, to help us do this expansion. And he's part of this vision. And he's one of the reasons RFTA has been as successful as it has been. So, David, do you have any thoughts on what's coming down to pike?

Dan:

Well, what is your kind of vision for bike share and mobility? You've helped a lot in the development of the transit services you served on the board.

David:

Well, one of the things that we were talking about was this 50%, roughly 50% of trips originating or ending at the BRT station. And one of the things that we really target or that's been really a boon for RFTA is these short trips. I think roughly, people measure these things. I think roughly 40% of all trips in the United States are two miles or less. Meanwhile RFTA has focused so much of its resources. So much of its time on the BRT system, which basically has about seven or eight boarding locations throughout this 40 mile corridor. So we have been very much focused on these long bus trips and it's been great. It's been very successful because we've been able to move as fast or faster than the automobile.

David:

And we have head ways during peak hours that are roughly less than 10 minutes. And at that point, you don't really need a schedule. You just show up at the BRT station and you don't even really need to pay attention to schedule, you know a bus will be there soon. However, that's also driven a lot of people to go to the BRT stations. We actually have about 50 stops throughout our system, but everyone wants to go to the BRT station. So we've really been struggling to make sure that we can get people to and from those areas. And we've built park and rides, everything we do for that first and last mile is kind of a tarnished silver bullet. Park and rides are great, but not everyone wants to have a giant parking lot.

David:

We don't want people driving from the station. Not everyone can drive. We don't want people to drive. So WE-cycle has been a boom, but the other thing to think about too is just the general mobility that's provided by WE-cycle. It's not just the fact that people can take a bike to and from their first and last mile from their location. It's also just as blow. This ability for people just to be able to get on a WE-cycled bike, whether or not they're using transit, is all these small trips that we are now taking off the roads in Aspen, Glenwood Springs and all these other places. That's really a boom and so you can leave your car and get on your bike, then if you're on a bike, you're walking more or you're interacting more with the community.

David:

There's just so many benefits. You're you don't need a parking space anymore. We don't need to spend so much resources on pavement, and we can really make our communities thriving and more beautiful, hopefully. And that's also part of the vision of first and last mile. And so I mean we can't do all these stuff without grant resources. And so obviously I'm thrilled. I've always been thrilled to help out find recess or be a team and I'm also equally thrilled to start looking for resources for first and last mile, because that's in many ways, the next frontier for creating a thriving, multimodal transportation system.

Marcela:

~~No,~~ that was great because I think you touched on something that's very important, about transportation and having a multimodal system is active transportation and the benefit that has to creating healthy communities and being able to live an active life and engage with your community. In a car you can't get to know your neighbor or walk by some window shopping or really get your feet on the ground. And I think that this trend towards more multimodal communities... I'm sure Jane Jacobs would be very proud and very excited.

Mirte:

I just wanted to hop in and add to that and say both, because I think one thing that's diff... You asked how do we measure? It gets really challenging... [inaudible 00:49:08] One thing we have to do.... So, one of our goals every year is through our rider passholder survey is we reach out to our rider then we try to understand their behaviors and they affirm the importance of the connectivity between our two services. According to our passholder survey, 77% of our riders combine their use of RFTA with WE-cycle. And I just wanted to read a little poem that one of our riders wrote to underscore the value that they find in this service. And I think it's through words and our own experience that the connectivity comes to life.

Mirte:

And so I will quote "My commute to work, I didn't like. From the BRT to the office was a hike. But long walks are in the past, as now I go fast. As I commute on a WE-cycle bike." [Bikeshare can 00:48:12] bring smile to our faces in combination with how we expedite and accelerate our commutes through the bus and the bike. And so maybe a poem can underscore how we quantify the impact of what we're doing collectively.

Dan:

And I think if you, again, I invite people's attention to Mirte's annual report. But when you look through the annual report, she has all these pictures of hundreds of people that use bikeshare, and they're all smiling and happy and joyful. And that's a feeling that you get when you use that mode of transportation. It's just fun and she's made it easy. I've got my own little card here, a key fob that I can stick into the docking station, get a bike out really easy.

Dan:

And a lot of times, and I haven't done it because of the pandemic. Haven't been up to Aspen very frequently, but when I have meetings up there generally, get to the Park & Ride lot, the BRT station, get a BRT, go up to Aspen and then hop off the bus at Eighth street, I think next year, possibly, we might have some bikeshare docking stations out at the Airport Business Center, Buttermilk. So we have Park & Ride lots in those areas too.

Dan:

And I can hop off the bus at one of those stations and hop on an e-bike and get into town. Because I love to be able to go to those meetings and when everybody's... Sometimes the reporters are there and they say, "Well, Dan, how did you get to the meeting?" Or "Do you ride the bus?" " Yes, I rode the bus up here today and I also rode a WE-cycle to the meeting." And it just gives you this feeling, like, hey, I'm really doing something great for the environment and it's healthy and it's just a ton of fun. It really is. It's a lot of fun.

Dan:

And Mirte has made it so easy. She's worked on the Transit App and integrated the WE-cycle availability at docking stations. So you know as you're going up, "Oh, there's going to be some bikes at this station if I get off," and integrated our seasonal zone pass with a WE-cycle pass. And also on that Transit App, you can see our bus schedule for those places where the docking stations are, where all the docking stations are and it's really cool. And it's all because of her that this has happened.

Mirte:

The integration of what you just described is so exciting because the riders value that as well. And I will say, I am one of the team, that we have accomplished that, WE-cycle. And there's an extraordinary team of individuals who are passionate and aligned with our mission of connecting people to place that make WE-cycle what it is. Not only is it our team members who work diligently, get their hands greasy, dirty, heavy lifting, they move the bicycles around by bike, but it's also our partners who supported in order to make these integrations happen, and the foresight, and willing to look ahead and take the risk of trying something new. And that's something we really did with the Transit App as well, in 2015 PBSC Urban Solutions Inc, who is WE-cycle's bikeshare infrastructure provider and has been since our launch reached out to partner with us and the app Transit to do a beta test of bikeshare undocking through the app.

Mirte:

And so in the fall of 2015, WE-cycle riders were actually the beta testers for this, at-the-time-innovation, of checking out bikes with their app and concurrently with that, we reached out to RFTA and brought RFTA on board with all the timetables being integrated into the Transit App as well. And so it's now been five years that we've been providing that offering. And our riders value the integration. They value the seamlessness of it, providing a one-stop opportunity to not only see when your bus is coming in live time, but then once you're on the bus, as Dan just mentioned, you can anticipate where you're going to get off the bus and how many bikes are there, so that you can even once again, accelerate your commute. And this past year 85% of our bikes that were checked out at stations were checked out using the app Transit. And that has grown. We realized that this was also in the pandemic era, reducing touch points was a great value for our riders, and so using their app was very important to them. And I think our riders continue to reiterate, for them, how important this integration is. Per the passholder survey, 66% of our riders feel that it's very, to extremely important to access the valleys' transportation in one app.

Mirte:

And so it's an integration that WE-cycle and RFTA are continuing to work on and to improve. And I think with time and technology and alignment, we will collectively find ways to continue to reduce the friction of mode transfer and also communicate through one portal. We all realize that we have so many different inputs into our personal feeds, whatever those feeds might be. And if we can simplify and make one that is coherent, cohesive, and encapsulating of all of our transit information, then we are more apt to get individuals to buy in and use those modes because it's easy and it's all in one place.

Marcela:

Very true. I've used the Transit App for getting around town before, and it's very nice to be able to see the timetables in a very easy user interface because we don't have bikeshare where I live. It is not integrated with that, but I could see the value in having a one-stop-shop for a seamless trip and being able to kind of visualize where you're going and all the steps you're going to have to take. And it sounds like the Transit App makes it very easy and very seamless.

Marcela:

Do you have any advice or insight for other planners that might be listening that are looking at grant opportunities to fund bikeshare in transit connections in their community?

David:

I do think that there may be some opportunities with the Economic Recovery legislation that there may be more opportunities for funding all sorts of multimodal transportation in the next four years or so, between the Recovery Act and maybe even earmarking, if there are some States or districts that are interested in multimodal transportation at all levels, the next couple of years may be a great opportunity for funding, not just traditional transportation, but all sorts of transportation, roads transit, first and last mile and everything else. And I do think that there is increasing recognition that a healthy and transportation system is one that is multimodal and provides choice.

Dan:

And I think the issue that is probably going to dominate, certainly be one of the higher priorities for some of these grants is transportation equity. I was just reading an article that was put out by Colorado Department of Public Health and Education yesterday that indicated that there is, from some of the studies that have been doing there, there's a link between air quality, for example, and COVID-19, higher incidences of COVID-19, more severe effects from COVID-19, deaths from COVID-19. And typically these are in communities of color and low income neighborhoods, that in many cases are next to highways or in industrial areas and so forth.

Dan:

And then I'm seeing that there's an INFRA grant that came out and equity is a big issue. And one of the criteria that you have to meet in order to get the funding, and much of the funding that's going to be coming out of Washington and potentially the State in the years ahead is going to really emphasize equity, and trying to extend these services, whether they be traditional fixed route services or micro mobility or bikeshare to those communities that would not typically necessarily be served by them.

Dan:

And in Carbondale, for example, their low income housing is located probably a mile and a half to two miles from our bus rapid transit station. And we have a circulator route that boots from the station through the commercial core of town, but it excludes that low-income housing development, and this would be a great place for us to implement a bikeshare system so that people could have more convenient access to our bus rapid transit station or to downtown or wherever they want to go. These little e-bikes and even the pedal bikes have nice little baskets on them and people can put their stuff in them and they can go shopping and they can run errands and things like that. So I think there'll be opportunities for us and for David to put his skills to use, applying for funds because our grants will focus on this equity issue to a greater extent, perhaps, than we have in the past.

Marcela:

Yes, definitely.

Marcela:

I'm excited to see what comes. This conversation made me want to touch on the WE-cycle program Movimiento en Bici that provides accessible and affordable bikeshare to the Roaring Fork Valley's Latinx community. So I'd love to hear a little bit more about that in ways that WE-cycle and RFTA are working towards mobility justice. I know that talking about equity in the next four years and grant opportunities, I think there's a lot of interplay there.

Mirte:

I mean, very much so in terms of what the future, our collective goals and values and priorities as we move forward and have been also since our inception of the systems in the Basalt area, which incorporates the communities of Willits and El Jebel. In 2016, we launched the Movimiento en Bici program, supported by the Better Bike Share Partnership and in doing so, it was critical to us to situate stations in lower income, primarily Latino/Latina neighborhoods.

Mirte:

And then citing a station in of itself, doesn't create engagement and usership and buy-in. We've created an ambassador program where members of the community reach out to their peers, to community

groups, to other nonprofits, to other resources, to the community and including pre-pandemic era door-to-door, inspire a friend, take a friend for a ride to demonstrate that these bikes are easy to access. Ambassadors are critical in reducing that concern that these bikes are perhaps not for us, for me, or that they are going to be too expensive and I'm going to be penalized for using them.

Mirte:

It's been really important to be able to have native speakers explain how to use them, inspire confidence in using the bikes to access the bus stop and, or to run errands in one's own community. Also in the importance of getting fresh air and using the bikes for healthy active living, and to explain all of those aspects has been in Spanish, has been critical. I think one of a high point for us this year is one of our members of our Movimiento en Bici program, who was a high school student at Basalt High School, had been riding the bikeshare to and from different aspects of his day-to-day and was the first member of his family to go on to college and then has come back and joined WE-cycle as one of our Bike balancers this past year. And so how equity involves the full cycle of not only engaging the riders in terms of using the service, but also then bringing the members of the community into our team and to be able to create engagement as such.

Mirte:

It's a priority of ours, we have a lot of work left to do, and we've just... The very tip of the iceberg and making sure that our system remains equitable and representative of the diversity of our valley.

Marcela:

That's really great. And also really great story about that high school student. Feel like there's a lot of full circle stories in this podcast conversation. I always like hearing how the story ends. Just talking to my cousin about unsolved mysteries, he's like, "They just kill me," because you never know how they end.

Marcela:

One question that I wanted to ask Dan and David, from RFTA's perspective, do you all have any advice for fellow Transit Agencies that are looking to partner with a nonprofit or private organization to coordinate bikeshare in their community?

Dan:

Well, I would encourage him to certainly explore the opportunities to develop those partnerships. There's a very clear nexus between Bikeshare and Transit and the bikeshare will contribute to their missions just like it contributes to ours. And in fact, that's one of our outcomes, one of our objectives is to increase the ability of people to make trips throughout the region without the need to get into a car. For a lot of very good environmental reasons, reducing automobile congestion, reducing pressure on park and ride facilities, demand for bike racks on buses, because it's healthier, because it's more environmentally friendly and clean and all those kinds of things.

Dan:

I would be surprised if most Transit Agencies aren't already exploring the possibilities for partnerships with nonprofits that do bikeshare, in many cases they might put out and request for proposals and see whether or not in denser communities there are for-profit organizations that can provide those kinds of services. But I think the beauty of working a nonprofit from RFTA's perspective is that it's entrepreneurial. It brings the best of a number of different worlds together because it does have the

public sector partnership that provide some stability in the funding, something hopefully that can be counted on from year to year.

Dan:

...funding something hopefully that can be counted on from year to year, but it still involves reaching out to the private sector for grants, for docking stations, for naming rights of stations, for advertising and those kinds of things. And it kind of integrates those two dynamics into a way that I think provides more energy, more opportunities. I think for the system to grow and to receive community support. It's not all just a public subsidized kind of program. There is some private sector investment and near to has mastered the art of getting partners and in partnership, the more successful partnerships that you develop, the more successful partnerships you're going to be able to develop. They build synergy and energy and so forth and enthusiasm.

Dan:

And that's what I like about working with WE-Cycle is that they're innovative. And I think the risks sometimes, and we've kind of had these discussions about having it be part of the organization is that you lose that entrepreneurial spirit and energy because we tend to be in the transit side a bit more bureaucratic than I think WE-Cycle is and a non-profit is. I mean, they're used to having to really work hard and seize the day and every opportunity that comes their way and moves very swiftly and to be very nimble. And some of that energy I think could get lost by having it in house, but that is certainly a possibility as well. And we're exploring that with WE-Cycle, but I think that Mirte has more freedom to do it the way that she believes it needs to be done as a nonprofit. And then if we can develop the appropriate contract to provide her the resources she needs, then the thing is just going to take off and it's going to work beautifully as it already is in the community, she's already serving with WE-Cycle.

Marcela:

Awesome. Yes, I can see that and it takes a village really. And I think that a major takeaway from this whole narrative is that when you partner and work with the other members and stakeholders in your community, you can accomplish incredible things that you just can't do alone.

Dan

You're right. Correct. They are having that private sector component, it increases the potential for there to be community pride in the system. I think our region is very proud of RFTA and what we do. They may complain about us, but when we've gone to the polls, we've always been successful. But when you can bring the private sector in too and share some of the opportunity for pride and investment in the system, I think that that just makes it stronger.

Marcela:

Yes.

Mirte:

I concur with all of that. And Marcela you just said, it takes a village, and we are few of the many voices and energy and hard workers that have made this cohesive system success. And I will attribute our riders as well. We have passionate RFTA and bike share riders. And as Dan just mentioned, they come to the polls to support the initiatives and the passage of ballot measures seven, eight in 2018, which was a property tax measure to support RFTA's ongoing operations, innovations and enhancements was

supported by those who ride and love and trust the transit service and believe in its potential, and also rely on it in such a way that recognize investment in its ongoing sustainability is critical to our collective sustainability and viability as a region.

Mirte:

And we are, as Dan described earlier, really a long linear valley that is connected by RFTA and RFTA is, we have three different counties, X number of different jurisdictions, all in this one watershed. And, but we are all connected through the RFTA corridor in service, and we are a village and may have collectively achieved a lot together. And so I do want to call out and acknowledge the many individuals, partners and investors who have bought into this vision who have supported this vision and trusted those of us on this call and others to help carry it forward.

Marcela:

Yeah, that's really great. This is also interesting from just learning that RFTA had done the first BRT in a rural community to everything with the e-bike pilots, but I will not digress. So it's about RFTA being in the process of implementing Destination 2040. So we're going to end on a big picture note. Could you all describe the plan, where it stands and how bike share fits into that implementation and feel free to have any parting thoughts on that note too?

Dan"

Well, I'll begin. And I want David to get in here as well. We began our planning effort for the Destination 2040 Plan in 2016. And David was the project manager and we, how I hired Parsons as our consulting team. And we started doing a lot of community outreach to find out what the needs of those communities were. And Bike share really rose to the surface, along with the improvements and enhancements to transit services, making them more convenient, more consistent on a year round basis. And then we needed some infrastructure projects, expansion of our maintenance facility in Glenwood Springs to accommodate more buses for the future. A underpass project, 200 passes in Glenwood Springs to enable trail users to go under a busy arterial street and across the state highway to get to our BRT station, some transit centers, bus stop improvements, affordable housing for our employees, and we're moving forward.

Dan:

It has been a little easier to, during the pandemic to plan for these capital projects than it has been for us to move forward with service improvements, because we had to restructure our services to fit within the COVID-19 guidelines in terms of how many people we can allow on a bus at one time, social distancing and that sort of thing. And when you limit your capacity in a bus to 50% of the seated capacity, then you have to provide a lot of scheduled service and you also have to provide backup service to handle the overflow.

Dan:

So once the pandemic is over, then we hopefully can reinstate our existing services and start layering on some of these service improvements that were approved by voters in 2018. We're about to launch a regional bike share study, and a first last mile mobility development plan near to is a resource expert, that is a consultant that we'll be working with along with another consulting firm to start reaching out to the communities and working with them to develop these partnerships that we've been talking about



here, because RFTA will not have, didn't really designate enough funding in our plan to pay for everything.

Dan:

Each community is going to have to bring some resources to the table, and we're also going to have to seek grants and try to get more resources so that we can purchase the infrastructure. And then there are ongoing operating costs. There are office spaces and warehouses for bikes, and a lot of equipment and facilities and things that we'll have to acquire in order to gradually. And I think that's one of the keys is, you know RFTA has been successful because it's taken advantage of incremental opportunities to improve its service. You know when people want the whole loaf at one time, and if they don't get that, then they don't want anything, you don't get anywhere.

Dan:

I've been here for 30 years. I know where we started. I know where we are today. I know we have a long way to go, but we are so far from where we started. It's really amazing. And now because of this Destination 2040 Plan and the approval of a 2.65 mill property tax by the voters, we are positioned to be able to leverage more funding and to really make it a lot better.

Dan:

You know, as I always often say, when we did BRT, it wasn't the end of transportation planning. It was kind of the beginning of the new era and that we're in that kind of transportation Renaissance right now, where we have lots of potential, do a lot of wild and crazy things with autonomous vehicles, with bike share with lots of different mobility services and devices and so forth. And I think we're finally getting to the point where it might actually be some real fun and I'll turn it over to David, just to, because he was instrumental in getting the Destination 2040 Plan adopted, improved, and he's working on getting all of the things that we said we were going to do for the voters actually constructed, built, and implemented, and he deserved a lot of the credits. So David, you're on.

David:

I have to say, Dan gives me way too much credit. Dan had many sleepless nights making this thing happen. And I was just standing on Dan shoulders most of the time during that process. I can add is that, it is incredibly important for us to get that mill levy passed because it did provide long-term support for bike sharing for first and last mile for a number of transportation improvements.

David:

I think, as I said before, a healthy transportation system is a multimodal one-to-one that has a lot of choice and Destination 2040 provided a lot of choice for the train system, for bike sharing, for bike ped opportunities like those airstream crossings and state highway 82 for allowing people to move back and forth safely.

David:

It is just the tip of the iceberg. We can't do everything with Destination 2040, but it is a good foundation for future improvements. And again, I think that the future improvements are not just going to be in transit, that they are going to be in first and last mile, like bike share. And I'm excited to see what's going to happen in the next five years in terms of planning and implementation of first and last mile, because those are 40% of trips. Nationwide are two miles or less, and a lot of those are going to be in transit, but

a lot of those are going to be, can be captured by bike sharing and other first and last mile improvements.

Mirte:

RFTA's vision to include bike share as part of its Destination 2040 Plan is attribute to its leadership and to its team and acknowledging that the transportation system is evolving and that a healthy transportation ecosystem involves, as David has underscored choice, it involves independence. It involves the opportunity for riders to switch up their mode based on what their needs are at that time. And that is going to recreate evolving our system and shifting our offerings to adapt to the times, to the needs, to require mobility justice, to inclusiveness in our service area. And most importantly, also that it's recognizing that none of it is static and that we're, I think we together have to look at this plan as its roadmap work collaboratively between our regions and between our jurisdictions. And I think that's what perhaps this conversation embodies for me is that we are, our success is together and that with the jurisdictions where member jurisdictions of RFTA and our riders and making sure we best serve them by seamless coordination between our areas, because travel inherently is anything but contained.

Mirte:

And our missions as organizations are to connect each other and to all carry our weight and do the heavy lifting and each member of this call, as well as all of our organizations have really taken leaps of, taken risks, looked ahead, been kind of, had foresight and been willing to try something new in order to create the services that we're providing today. And I'm thrilled. And we're honored as a bike share system that the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority has this committed vision of integration and multi-modal service. And is enthused to bring us along on the journey and that there is most importantly, a funding source to help support that vision. Vision is one thing, implementation funding is another. And I thank RFTA for having provided the seed funding for WE-Cycle to be where it is today and Dan and David and their colleagues for having brought us a decade into the bike share movement.

Marcela:

Great to see just such a great partnership. And it's like what that has resulted for and the impact that that's clearly had on the people who live in the Roaring Fork Valley. I think it's a really great example of what can be accomplished when we get outside of our silos, whether that's the transit silo, or a non profit or a community organization and partnering with private businesses, it's something that you can create. That's beautiful. And that will create a legacy. And I think a precedent for future planners and entrepreneurs and innovators to build off of.

Marcela:

Thank you so much for joining us. I think this is going to be a really great story to tell, and I think, and I hope that it inspires a lot of planners and folks that have kind of been thinking about these things in their own systems. Maybe just rumblings, be able to take those plans and put them into action. I've also appreciated the number of transportation and bicycle puns that have occurred in the past hour and a half.

Mirte:

Well, thank you Marcela, for inviting us in your initiative to bring us together, to tell this story, it's been an exciting journey. And as it's still big, we're still on it. The ride continues.

Marcela:

Yes, the ride continues.

Dan:

Yes. Thank you very much Marcela. We've all enjoyed. It has been a lot of fun and maybe we can do it again one of these days.