# Transcript for Microtransit – When and Where it Makes Sense

## Webinar by the National Center for Applied Transit Technology

Andrew: Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Andrew Carpenter. I am the director of the National Center for Applied Transit Technology. We are excited to be back with our webinars. It's been a few weeks, not a few weeks, a few months. We have a lot of great content in store for you coming up. In particular, we're going to focus a lot on microtransit over the next little while. So, we have this webinar. My colleague Marcela is going to do a podcast soon. And then also, we will likely have another webinar about microtransit in the next couple of months. We don't have any details on that yet but we will soon enough. So, make sure you keep an eye on our newsletter.

With that in mind, you can get to our newsletter at the website URL on the bottom of this slide, n-catt.org. And we are an FTA funded technical assistance center. We're here to help small urban, rural, and tribal transit agencies walk through the evolving technology landscape. There is a lot out there. And in the past year and a half have really accelerated the development, and consideration, and changes in the transit tech world. So, we're here to help agencies think very deliberately about what is out there and what options could best serve them and how to walk through those processes, and how to understand the impacts that different technologies could have on their agencies, and serving as that extra capacity for a lot of agencies that don't necessarily have the resources to do the research in-house.

So, we're here with a lot of various resources on our website. We have webinar recordings such as this one. We have guidebooks which one more is still in the process of being finalized. We're about to begin producing a few more in the next couple of months. We also have podcasts as I just mentioned. We also build fact sheets. So, we have a no wrong door approach to different technology topics. We highly encourage all of you to reach out to us with any suggestions for topics to cover, also, with any questions about anything you're trying to figure out. So, we do various forms of technical assistance. Basically, we can point you in the right direction if that's all you need.

But we also do a little bit more in depth technical assistance through our innovative technology strike teams which we are about to kick off. And then also our State Technology Summits where we work with state Departments of Transportation to kind of co-create technology priorities for the small urban and rural transit systems within that state. So, this way it's a collaborative effort with the agencies and the DOTs that we helped to facilitate and again walk through those different concepts. So, reach out to us. We're happy to help out wherever possible or find out who can help wherever possible.

And then also, a new product we've started working on is hands on workshops. In March and June, we held data management and digital tools for system redesign workshops. So, we are working on putting together some new ones again in the next few months. So, I really encourage you again to sign up for our newsletter where you will find out about those details as they become available. Also, since we're an FTA funded TA center, we work in a whole ecosystem network of other TA centers. So, the Transportation Technical Assistance Coordination Library compiles a lot of the work that comes across these five TA centers that you see over on the right here. So, you can get kind of a one stop shop on coordination in particular from this website. We highly encourage you to look at that as well.

And then finally, before we kick it off, Marcela and I are the main characters you'll see in N-CATT’s work. So, again, feel free to reach out to us as you need to and we're here to answer your questions and help you out. So, for today's webinar, we are focusing on microtransit and then the process behind it. It's a concept that has been talked about a lot. It's kind of had its ups and downs over the past few years with other topics such as mobility as a service and fair payment also being kind of up there as key things to consider. So, it's a tool. In some cases, it's not the best. In some cases, it works very well.

So, we want to give people some on the ground insights into how you can think about this and how you can arrive to the model that works best for you when it comes to microtransit if that's the best thing for you. We thought it would be great to show, too, neighboring counties who have done two very different things just to show how even if you're right next to each other, your needs and capacity can be entirely different. First, I'll hand it off to Karen Winger from Gwinnett County Transit. Then after that, we will hear from Phillippa Lewis Moss. Then at the end, we'll have time for questions and answers.

So, a couple of housekeeping things before I hand it off. There's a Q and A box in your toolbar. Feel free to submit any questions that you have through that Q and A box. We will keep an eye on it and Marcela or I will interrupt Karen or Phillippa if we need to, if it's a particularly pressing question or we might just save it until the end. But just know we are watching, sorry, we're keeping an eye, we’re not watching you. But we are watching that. And then also, if you would like to see the live transcript, there's also a little box that says CC for closed captioning so you can feel free to click on that and then you can see the live transcript as well. So, with that, I will hand it off to Karen. Thank you.

Karen: Thank you so much. I'm always excited to talk about microtransit. I'm still amazed that people still want to talk about our pilot project from a couple years ago but I'm always happy to share. Before I jump into Gwinnett County and our pilot project, I want to tell you a little bit of myself. My name is Karen Winger. I'm the transit division director here in Gwinnett County. And if you want to hear, if you want to know where we are, I had a MARTA map on here where the end of MARTA is where we begin. And what's also interesting about our story and the whole county’s story is if you look, those two orange counties we're right next to each other but are very different counties with needs, challenges, and opportunities. But we get the opportunity information share as neighbors.

I’ve been doing transit for 20 years. I started out as a bus operator and I'm going to do a shout out to UMass Transit Services just because I know someone is on watching the webinar. That was my trainer actually a very long time ago. I worked at various jobs within transit throughout the years. I spent some time with [inaudible 00:08:08] planning organization with a private transit operating company. And I've been with the county now working on six years. It's been a wild ride. So, a little bit about Gwinnett County Transit before we jump into our microtransit pilot.

So, we are a [inaudible 00:08:23] system. Like I said, we start where MARTA ends. We’ll be 20 years old this year. So we'll take our birthday presents in operating funds. We do offer local commuter and paratransit services. We have a third party operator that does all our operations, maintenance, and customer service. It's Transdev. They've been with us for over 10 years now. They've been doing it for quite a while. And then at a unique operating scenario, would you share that operator with the ATL Commuter Bus Service. It's the same contractor and we’re running under the same facility but there's sometimes behind the scenes challenges.

The customers don't have to see balancing operator need for example during the pandemic when there's only so many operators we have the workout schedules to make sure that both of us could meet our service needs. The current system is five commuter bus express routes out of three park and ride lots which is that darker purple line. The thinner routes are the local bus routes and then paratransit that comes around us and you can see [inaudible 00:09:28] get close enough to Phillippa there but maybe something.

So, why microtransit in Gwinnett? We ran this pilot from September of 2018 to April of 2019. And part of what was going on within the county at that time is we were working on a comprehensive transportation plan after EXPO which also seems like a lifetime ago had just happened in Atlanta. So, there was some new fresh technology out there. And I had some operational questions. And this is kind of a little bit of a foresight I guess into how some of us took the opportunity during the pandemic.

Sometimes, with technology and innovation, you just need to run it for a bit to see how it works because you can plan, and you can plan your plan but once you have [inaudible 00:10:14] human beings in there, we're going to muck it up. So, it was great to have this opportunity to run the pilot. And if you ask me questions, I can answer why we're sort of stalling on not putting it back. But it has nothing to do with the success of the pilot. It has all sorts of the other things to do that sometimes make infrastructure projects difficult to get to.

So, why the solution for Gwinnett? Well, portions of the county are well suited for fixed route transportation. A lot of the areas where we currently run fixed route are more densely populated. We have some areas of the county that are more rural. They're blacking sidewalk infrastructure that a fixed route bus would be a pretty empty bus ride up and down the streets all day. What I also like about the microtransit technology, I mean, we all know all on demand service we call and pre-book for the lovely deviated fixed route service which looks great in a plan. It was always very difficult to pull off operationally.

The nice thing about this technology and the disruptive technology is a bit of marketplace for last five years. They've really refreshed that model to make it. I think a very viable solution in some situations. And then now, which is wild because I'm still talking to different microtransit providers, well it was just a wish and a dream when we did the pilot in 2019. This can be disintegrated into the rest of the network.

There are microtransit app providers that are able to, now, with the microtransit zone, integrate the trip solution into the rest of your fixed route network, which I think is really such a game changer in being able to help people be able to seamlessly plan their trips and arrange them because, I mean, if you're running a suburban service, buses only come by every 30 minutes and your microtransit bus misses that bus by a minute. That's not great service and that doesn't really make transit a great solution for that individual.

So, having that technology now to be able to not only do the microtransit piece but coordinate with your AVL system on the rest of your system is huge. And you'll hear a little bit different story over in the Hall County because we do have a third party operator. We’re moving towards an agency owned microtransit solution. Some of this is because we already have the vehicles. We have a contractor that provides the drivers. But also, thinking long term, those drivers go through our prescribed maintenance or training program. The vehicles go through the prescribed maintenance program. The contractor takes care of it. But we'd say you need to make sure the X, Y, and Z, they go through a drug and alcohol testing program.

So, there's certain elements you can't guarantee if you're leveraging a lot on TNCs, Transportation Network Companies. Also, those vehicles are going to be able to be integrated in your system. The way we're looking at doing a long term is using the same vehicles for paratransit and microtransit because we don't have a ton of paratransit. So, thinking of how you're going to manage your fleet, you use the same type of vehicles, same kind of camera system. It just provides an extra level of security by integrating it more into the rest of our service and also too, on the customer service end, if we have the system integrated with the rest of our services, those drivers are also going to be more likely to know about the other services and provide other additional customer service elements that kind of 10 gentle hard to measure question about how do I get to this place below, the person can tell you, well, I can't take microtransit here, then switch to the bus. That's why we were heading towards that solution.

The pilot we did with TransLoc, and it was out of after EXPO they were running these pilot opportunities. I think they'll still do them but I can get you the contact information once we get through with that. And I know this TransLoc, this Via, [inaudible 00:13:54] is a bunch of companies doing this now. But we partner with TransLoc for the solution. They provided us the app. They did a great job of training and set up. It's really easy to do the training and the setup. I think the hardest part is probably moreso on the marketing and getting customers used to the new type of service. They provided some scenario simulations for we picked up three areas and we picked the areas. They fully supported the technology during the whole deployment and they walked us through the implementation step by step.

And they were a great partner. I will say that during the entire pilot we were either the most busiest or busiest systems a lot of times. And that's why it was a pilot for them too. We were definitely working their algorithm and I know it's much, much better now partly because of how much work we were given at that time.

Advantage of a pilot. Like I mentioned, I think we saw a lot of this during Covid, people taking advantage, because none of us like failing, right? So, with Covid, some of us had to innovate, were forced to innovate, but we also took the opportunity to innovate. And this pilot was sort of a precursor of this. With the technology and innovation, sometimes you need to just deploy and see how it works before to answer some of the questions that you're just not going to be able to answer until you deploy to put human beings into it.

At that time, we were the first one in Georgia to run this sort of pilot in the whole state. There was some older flex on demand services. Like in Cobb County, they were doing still the phone call and scheduling for trapeze. But we were the first one to use the app. We also ran it for free partly because selling transit in Georgia is not always the easiest sell. We just want to get people to try the service partly because we also a little bit wanted to break the service to see how far we could push the model, where does things start to bend and break, but also just give people, hey, try it out.

It's amazing how we all do it. We all lined up for free donut day or free ice cream day. It's only two bucks [inaudible 00:16:10] but when it's free, it's magical. So, we ran the whole pilot for free partly so we could test the proof of concept. We also had some questions on contracting methods which we then used. We actually just renewed our contract with Transdev one of the renewal but we have rates in there set up based off the microtransit pilot that are a little bit more competitive than if we had just used our hourly paratransit rate.

And then also, some of the questions that we had on the policy of the program, like, you have rules for paratransit, you have rules for fixed route. What do you use for microtransit? So, this helps us answer some of the questions on what is a no show on microtransit. How do we govern the two systems? And it ends up being a hybrid between fixed route and paratransit. But we just didn't know. We had to throw it out there and see how it works. Our pilot ran, like I mentioned, for seven months. Overall, the pilot received positive feedback overall. Throughout, the pilot service continued to increase.

I think the first month, mainly the issues were around training policy development rather than technology. The technology was fine. And some of it was just the idea of how do we schedule operators, like initially, our contractor had all the drivers changing at the same time, which meant for 30 minutes there was no vans ready available for service. So, that kind of got the whole system behind. So, that was a learning opportunity. And the service was well received in the community. And I want to mention that Snellville, previous before this, actually had a city ordinance that said they did not want public transit, like had actually taken the time to write their bylaws. And just before this had changed that, so, I suggest we want more transit service. So, they really wanted to come back.

Here's a filmograph of how much the service grew. We're carrying upwards of 283 people a day in Snellville in six vehicles. So, pretty productive service. It's way more than a [inaudible 00:18:17] on a daily, on a day with the same amount of vehicles. And actually my lower productive, lower carrying fixed route services carry about 500 people. In an area that I think would really struggle with fixed route just because of a lot of [inaudible 00:18:34] access and sidewalks and stuff like that, I think that's a really great number. And it was used by all. There were high school kids using it to get home after school. I've heard some stories about some seniors, a bunch of them in a senior care center, one of them in a wheelchair and they weren't able to go out. All the vehicles were [inaudible 00:18:57] accessible. So, with the microtransit service, they were able to go out.

There was a story of the Exceptional Foundation with some young adults with developmental disabilities. I'm going to read at the very end here about how they were able to leverage the service to really become part of the community and just having that transportation access. And you'll find that it's kind of like Baskin Robbins. There’s a 100 flavors of microtransit. Everyone has a little bit different flavor. So, before I read the email that I got from the Exceptional Foundation, I just want to kind of let you know that our service, we did a zone, there was on demand, curb to curb, point to point, any place. So, we didn't have virtual bus stop. Some systems have virtual bus stop. Some have curb to curb. The whole zone was about 17 square miles and you can see it drawn there on the map. Reservations were made at time of the trip.

Because we ran the pilot for free, we weren't accepting pre-reservations. But when we bring it back, I would consider bringing doing pre-booking. And maybe if you cancel it a certain amount of time before the ride, you forfeit, pre pay your fare and you forfeited or however develop that policy. And then just so you know, the pilot zone, we had connections to the ATL Commuter Bus Service three Walmarts, a hospital, and numerous schools.

And before I close out, I just love to read the story. I can read it now without crying because this is very sweet. But just before, literally, the day before the pilot starts I get this call from the group called Exceptional Foundation. They work with young adults that have just aged out of the school system with developmental disabilities to give them a place to go but also to work with them to get into the community and whatnot. They were just outside the bubble because it's a pilot. I put them in the bubble at the start of the program. And they use the heck out of this service. And because the phones, using smartphones to order the service, these young kids or young adults have cognitive, they're functionally illiterate so they can do speech to text to order rides. So, now, because of the capabilities built into a smartphone, the app made the service accessible to them and they were able to order their own rides.

So, the executive director sent us this lovely email at the end of it. I'm going to read this and then kick it off to Phillippa. Hello. I am the executive director of a newly established nonprofit called the Exceptional Foundation of Atlanta. Our nonprofit is a private day program for adults with intellectual disabilities. Basically, we’re the next step for those with disabilities once they graduate of the school system. We believe that adults with disabilities should continue to thrive beyond graduation. And we also believe that they have many abilities and should be active members within their local communities. However, these abilities cannot be supported without access to transportation.

And I think we all can find stories of people that just with access to transportation they can become part of the society they live in. Our day program has been using this novel microtransit program regularly since the inaugural week. The microtransit allows our participants to schedule transportation and then travel as an entire group or break up into small groups going in different directions. We have trained our adults with disabilities to use the application and they have been able to do so of its simple interface and user friendly format. With the microtransit program, our participants have been able to access the community in which they live.

Our participants are able to shop at local grocery stores and shops, dine at local restaurants, access local parks and serve others in need. With the microtransit program, we were able to shop for grocery store items need to prepare monthly dinner meals for foster families in our area. And because of the program, our participants have been able to volunteer at an adult respite program. The microtransit program gives adults with intellectual disabilities access into the community that they too deserve to have access.

I actually have a photo over here on my desk when I have a bad day, that’s of them riding because they look so happy on the bus.

So, I speak on behalf of all those connected to adults with intellectual disabilities. Thank you for creating a public service. They can get adults with disabilities a life beyond their own homes which I think not just this program but speaks to the importance of transit in general. Hopefully, soon, will get another crack at a referendum and be able to bring the service back because it's definitely needed in the county.

And that is the end of our pilot story. And I'm going to toss it over to my friend in Hall County to talk about her current service. Let's run it up in Hall.

Andrew: Alright. Karen, one quick question for Terry and Julie. I see the other two but this one is more direct to this one. Did you find that many people use microtransit as a way to connect to ATL Transit for employment opportunities?

Karen: There were some people were connecting at the park and ride lots to get on the commuter bus service. We did find that. I don't know if they were using it to get to employment or just downtown. I know some people will use that. Georgia State students will use the commuter bus service and sometimes people use it for medical appointments but there are definitely connections that we could see people using both getting on and off at the park and ride locations in the park in the area.

Andrew: Awesome. Thank you. And I'll get to these other questions after Phillippa. So, thank you.

Phillippa: Very good. Thank you so much. That was a great presentation, Karen. I'm going to share my screen. Can you guys all see that introduction to WeGo?

Andrew: Yes.

Phillippa: All right. So, that's a yes. So, as introduced, my name is Phillippa Lewis Moss. I am the Director of Gainsville-Hall County Community Services. So, another [inaudible 00:24:49] I’m the Director of Human Services. My department is located about 20 minutes, 30 minutes, well, about 20 minutes away from Karen's office in Gwinnett and Hall County. And we're about 50 miles north of Atlanta, the center of Atlanta. I've been with the City Gainsville-Hall County government in this position for actually 20 years. So, I've been here as long as the Gwinnett Transit has been up and running.

Prior to being in Georgia, I'm actually originally from Oakland, California so I actually was raised on AC transit and Bay Area Rapid transit, BART. So, I've been riding the buses alone or with family members since literally I was about six or seven years old. Caught three buses to school every day and then three buses back home. So, I am a transit supporter. I see it as an opportunity to bring communities together. It's also for me a great equalizer for people who have different financial wherewithal. I remember using the transit to go to the county courthouse library rather to study for the SAT. I met some very long term friends on the bus, on the train. I even shared with the group earlier today, I actually got my first kiss on a BART train. So, very important stuff that happens on those vehicles.

So, let me tell you a little bit about our community as it relates to transit. So many, many moons ago, we actually did have a trolley system that traveled throughout Gainsville-Hall county, and that course that was very popular in the 1800s, early 1900s. And then in the ‘80s, rather the late ‘70s, we actually debuted our demand response, kind of paratransit service which was created really to serve the aging population and persons with disabilities. And that's the case with a lot of communities particularly in the Southeast. Actually in 1999, but the full year was 2000, we debuted our first fixed route service. It was affectionately known as Red Rabbit. And then a few years later, we re-branded the service and called it Gainesville Connection.

I'm going to power through the first four or five slides because it just provides kind of a background to our community and so forth. And then I will slow down after that when I speak more about microtransit in detail. So, in short, Hall County actually has a population now of about 205,000 people based on the 2020 census data we've just gotten. The county seat is known as Gainesville has about 40,000 people now in the city.

We are classified as small urban. But as I just mentioned, based on the 2020 census, we have every expectation that we will be reclassified as large urban and that will of course impact the amount of funding that we get from our section 5307 funds significantly less dollars in fact. And we have pretty much used vehicles, purchased them off of state contracts or the vehicle that [inaudible 00:28:23] kind of a Ford Goshen Cut-A-Way vehicle is what we've been using literally for two decades. Some of the things that characterized our community is the fact that low density, we have very large residential lots 1,2,3 acre lots with wooded driveways and so forth.

We've got a largely industry and service related employment opportunities. We've got very little office density. We do have a higher density in the city of Gainsville which is why we largely operated our fixed route Gainsville Connection within the city. And our demand response dollar ride largely within Hall County. And our trip patterns, as you'll see in a moment, were incredibly random. I’ll show an image with you in a moment but it was shared with me that you guys really want to know what it was like to unfold an entire microtransit project.

So, I'm going to tell you about our program which is currently called WeGo Powered by Via, the vendor that we selected to provide our microtransit software. So, kind of when Karen and Gwinnett County were ending their pilot, we actually started beginning our study and examination of, okay, what's this thing that Gwinnett is doing? What's going on in Arlington, Texas, and by Sacramento in different places. So, we actually released a request for proposals and Via was one of several organizations that responded. And they conducted a Microtransit Feasibility Study and that included a simulation so instead, Gwinnett County where they actually did a pilot project, we just did a computer simulation to show what life would look like if we have microtransit service. Of course they came back and said, “Yeah, we can actually do this here.” We actually waited just about six months and then we said, “Okay, let's go ahead and let's release request for proposals for microtransit technology.”

Now why didn't we ask for technology as opposed to a complete turnkey operation? For us it was mostly about control to be completely honest with you and the fact that we launched just after COVID proved the method behind the madness is that it was very important for us that if for some reason microtransit didn't work well in our community, because we didn't run a pilot it was only on computer, that we can pull back, that we would have to compete. We would have our drivers. We would have our vehicles. We would still be in charge of management and that if any time we need to pull back and do something different, we would have the wherewithal to do that.

Also, COVID being a perfect example, we closed for several months and then we have modified service to make sure people got to medical appointments such as dialysis. It was very important to me that if something happened in our community such as COVID which of course I couldn't predict, but that I could close down my service with a phone call or stored it up with a phone call or modify service and not have to negotiate contracts or talk to another third party about the wet cell. The other thing is that if we had a community emergency that required us to even lend our vehicles to another transit agents such as Gwinnett or Forsyth or someplace else. We have hurricanes and things like that in this area that we could do that. We wanted to make sure that we have the freedom to use our assets in the way that we wanted to use them. That was a big part of us choosing microtransit, the technology and not a turnkey operation.

Once again we released the RFP for technology, Via responded and then just last year, at April we reviewed six proposals. We did this all inside the pandemic. Initially we thought, oh God, this is horrible, and we’re not going to lay eyes on people. They are in New York. They are here. They are in Boston, etc. We're really worried that we're not going to have like the powerful interview and demonstration, but it just so happens, that was kind of a blessing in disguise, because if you think about it, given that we really want just the technology, it was perfect because all the companies had to really demonstrate very powerfully their ability to communicate using technology and to actually show how their software worked literally like via Zoom routine or whatever facility or tool that we used. Actually, I thought it was more powerful that we had these sessions via online as opposed to actually in person.

Three vendors actually participated in an online demonstration and interviews. We selected Via. It took us a couple of months just to get the contract language in good shape. Honestly, it was one of my favorite contracts. It's probably like six pages. It's the shortest contract I've ever like executed. It was just simple, like in plain English and anyone, any member of my team can go to it and say these are the expectations of my team. These are the expectations of Via. It was just really as simple. We debuted five WeGo vans last December just within the city in Gainesville. We wanted to have a soft launch because Hall County is about 429 square miles. It's a lot of space. Right? We didn't want to get ourselves too far out there. We stayed within the city center with five vehicles and it took us about 60 days to realize that WeGo microtransit powered by Via was just going to be a game changer. I mean it just basically beat all the key performance indicators for our demand response and are fixed route. It was just non-negotiable.

As soon as we realize just how successful microtransit was, we actually went directly to our representatives at the Georgia Department of Transportation because we still considered some recipients and we say, “Hey look, we know we didn't think about this before, but WeGo is going so well. We actually want to sunset both our demand response and our fixed route cable connection service. We showed them the data and we went out on public hearings. We had three in person and three online. They went very successful. We documented the attendance and the comments really well. They responded to those comments in a way that showed the Department of Transportation and soon FTA that we really did listen to the pros and the cons and so forth. With that said, we sunset these 20 to 30 year old programs on June 30th. Now WeGo powered by Via is our sole public transit service in Gainesville to Hall County. It was pretty amazing.

It is still a small operation. We do operate 17 vehicles but from now we operate from Monday through Friday from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM based on the volume of rides repeating right now which is roughly between 200 and 300 rides a day. We believe that we may expand our service to 9:00 or 10:00 PM perhaps as soon as this Fall. Based on the comments we got from the public hearings, some of our transit dependent individuals, which actually represents the majority of our riders. They were accustomed to paying a dollar, the general fare and then 50 cents for transfer. When we launched the pilot, it was a $3 flat fee anywhere in the city but as I said, we got a lot of comments from our loyal passengers that a $3 even a $3 flat fee was going to be too much for them, particularly when you add on children and so forth.

What we decided to do is, we actually changed our fare structure so that now it's a one-way trip. It is only $2 if it's five miles or less. For every mile after five miles, it's only another 50 cents. Once again, it's a game changer. It's a really inexpensive way to get around town. The reason we chose $2 for five miles as the demarcation point is because the average trip our passengers take is about 4.2 to 4.3 miles. It means that the majority of our passengers were able to take a trip without having to transfer, stand in the rain, and stand in the sun, to do so for $2.

We still require masks. We still require seatbelts. We thought about making child seats available but we opted not to inside the COVID environment just because of sanitizing the vehicles. We do sanitize on an hourly basis, but kids are a little different than adults so we just opted not to do that. Our system operates through use of a cell phone. I'm going to show you how it works in just a moment but for people who don't have a smartphone or people who are InBank because it's a cashless system, we also have an opportunity for people to purchase vouchers from our administrative building. They can purchase vouchers for as low as $3 or as high as $100. The vouchers are actually just a number. It's a series of seven or eight digits. They literally enter that into their phone if they still have a cellphone or InBank or they can actually store their credits at our office so they can actually use their cell phone to arrange a pick up or where they can call our office kind of old school.

WeGo is a new ride share service available in our community. People can hail a ride using their smartphone. We use a RAM, a Lone Star van. We have two types 1 to 10 passenger, which some have 10 passengers or 12 passengers. We actually have two of our [inaudible 000:38:44] that we kept from our prior service that have roughly 14 seats. All of our employees, all of our drivers and our administrative staff are all employees of the city of Gainesville. As I said, we debuted last December with five vans and as of July 1st we actually have 17 vans on the road. The cool thing about microtransit and the fact that we use a computer algorithm is we don't actually have to have on the road all 17 vehicles at a time. In fact, sometimes we may not even have two vehicles on the road because the system is so sophisticated that it tells us our demand. As the algorithm actually learns our community, it actually can tell us to operate. It can tell the administration how many vans do we need on the vehicle? How many vans do we need on the street at 6:00 AM versus 2:00 PM versus 6:00 PM. We have found it to be incredibly efficient.

Of course, we went through a very big marketing campaign. This is an example of one of our larger vans. Our system, of course is called WeGo powered by Via. We were just very happy with how that came out. It's very simple and very easy to use. If you download the app at the play store it literally takes maybe 20 seconds to get the whole app. This is another example of one of the smaller vans and the diagram of the seating arrangement. All of the vehicles seat two wheelchairs, one adult wheelchair, and one junior wheelchair. Instead of using a wheelchair lift, which can be prone to mechanical issues and everyone's tipping accident, we went with just a simple ramp. That way an individual motorized wheelchair could just simply roll into the vehicle as opposed to having to wait for a lift to go up and down and so forth. So far we're really happy with that.

Let me just tell you about the anatomy of getting a trip. As I said, if you have a smartphone you don't have to call us. You don't have to put out cash. You simply pick up your phone once you've downloaded the app. The GPS is coordinated so it actually knows where you are, it can tell you what your address is and it gives you an opportunity to confirm or you have the right address or maybe it's off by one or two addresses. You enter the correct address and you tell it where you want to go. You can actually enter that address for the name and/or you can use a drop down list, which has, I think about 20 of our most popular sites. You can use the drop down list the same going to the hospital or going to WalMart or to the mall or something like that. Literally within 10-15 seconds the system will alert you and tell you that a vehicle is available and how soon it will get to you.

When we first debuted the service, vehicles were getting to people so quickly. It was taking about five or six minutes. We noticed when we went to our Via operation center, we noticed that people were making appointments and then cancelling. We couldn't figure out. We started calling passengers and asking. Why do you keep making appointments and then cancelling? People would say, “Well the vans are coming too quickly. We weren't ready. We don't have time.” We put out a media release that says, “Hey, when you guys make appointments with WeGo powered by Via have your person on your shoulder and your wallet in your pocket because these vans are going to get there quickly.” As we've expand from the city to the county which is a much larger area. The wait for the van is averaging about anywhere from 10 minutes in the city to 15 minutes in the county, which is still huge in comparison to our fixed route, which had a one hour headway in comparison to our demand response service, which you had to request the van at least two days prior. It's a huge win.

Now do we go door to door? We do not. If you are certified with a disability, we do go door to door. However, for the rest of the population, we have virtual bus stops. When I put in my address it may have me walk 250-300 feet. I think the average for the last couple of weeks have been a roughly 217 feet which is really a short walk, usually it's from one corner to the next and then you catch your vehicle there. When you hop aboard, you may be on board by yourself or you may be on board with two or three or four or five other people and as I said, masks are required. People have been really great about complying with that rule. I think I went over most of this.

One of the cool things about the customer interface is that customers have the opportunity to write a note. For example, they can say, “Hey, I'm wearing a red sweater. I've got three small children. I've got grocery bags with me.” Or any number of things that might be important to identify them or anything that's important for us to provide superior customer service. Once again, if you do not have a smartphone, you can pick up your old school phone, call into our office and our dispatchers can actually create an account for you online. Then whenever you need a trip, you simply call, let them know your name and they'll dispatch a vehicle for you. We are pushing and encouraging as many people as possible to use smartphones and I would say about 90% of the people-

Andrew: I think we lost Phillippa. We will wait a second, see if she unfreezes. In the meantime, maybe Karen we can get, I think we lost Phillippa. Okay, Karen we can go through some Q&A while we wait for Phillippa to come back.

Karen: Sure.

Andrew: All right. One quick question, how is your service categorized under FDA funding?

Karen: Right now? Well we use all local funding for the pilot but it would be categorized under on demand. I wouldn't be surprised if at some point there's a separate category for these microtransit services versus the regular paratransit on demand services, but that's where it's getting put right now.

Andrew: Got you. Also from Terry, oh here we go. Hello Phillippa. You're on mute.

Phillippa: I found out you guys have no idea when I cut out but I'm done.

Andrew: Okay. Sounds good in that case-

Karen: The great finale.

Andrew: If that’s all right with you we can roll right into Q&A and answer any questions. Sounds good. One thing that will do if we are not able to answer everything live, we will make sure we record these questions and post answers to them on the webinar recording page. You can always check back on that once we're done if we don't get to everything in here. A question from Terry and this would be more directed towards Karen. Does the pilot support proof of concept if it's for free but plan to charge later?

Karen: If we compare it to what Cobb County was doing with their non-technology based on demand, they were carrying 300 people a month. We were carrying 300 people a day. Even if we charge a fare, I mean obviously I expect to lose some ridership. I think we're going to be doing a lot better. For us a lot of the proof of concept was how does the operational piece work? No one had answers for that for me in 2018. How does this work with a contracted service because a lot of people are using their party operators to run it? I think for us it helped answered a lot of questions. It definitely showed that the technology made this on demand concept that have been used. I mean it's not a new on-demand service. It is not new. Deviated success . Not new but the technology taking this plan service looks great on the paper but operationally you pull your hair out trying to deploy it. I think it really does make a case but I will caution.

I mean I had one commissioner that wants to put microtransit everywhere. I'm like, “Whoa, hold on.” There's still cases where fixed route bus that's going to be your bread and butter, that's going to be your most efficient. I mean a lot of this, it's another tool in your toolbox. How can we most efficiently move the most people for the limited amount of money we have. I know there was another question there about ridership. Gosh if you look at these microtransit pilots, they are all so different. Some of them are focusing on how do we get riders to a rail station? That's only peak times of the day. All these are really tough to compare because they're not apples to apples, but they definitely help you cater it towards what is your specific problem you're doing. Even within a community, I'm definitely getting a little soap boxy here, but you did give me the microphone.

Even with the community, you could have different microtransit zones that are solving different challenges or opportunities in your community. Even within a specific transit program, you don't have to have your microtransit all be the same flavor. I think that's some of the really need stuff, but it's not going everywhere. I mean at the end of the day it's still more vehicles on the streets and the same thing with electric. It's like, “Well for all have electric Tesla's and we're all still sitting in traffic.” It's not the one all panacea, but it's a great tool to have in your toolbox to help solve some of the mobility challenges in your community.

Phillippa: I saw that there are some questions about the cost and for whole ride transit. Our WeGo operation is about 60% less than our fixed route so it's significant. It's significant savings.

Andrew: Excellent. Thank you. A question from Rachel, what would you recommend to other transit authorities that are trying to figure out if microtransit is a good option for them or not?

Phillippa: Okay, I wouldn't recommend you actually visit those transit places. Of course if you're in Georgia, you have the opportunity to go to Valdosta where you have turnkey or Hall County where we have just the software. To the extent you can visit those places, great. The other side or if you participate in venues like this where you can hear from people and get the what so about how the services operate and how they operate differently.

Karen: I think the other nice thing about thinking about deploying these services more so than fixed route, you can be a lot more editor if with it and you can be a lot more flexible to the response of the demand. Whereas fixed route, once that bus is out there, it's out there. Here being ready to have some additional vehicles on the street or changing how you schedule vehicles. It's a little bit more behind the scenes stuff that I think it gives a little bit more flexibility to respond to the demand that you don't see normally with some of the other modes of transportation.

Andrew: Were there any tweaks or surprises along the way?

Phillippa: Well for us I will tell you that the most pleasant surprise, we've used dispatch systems before and we have a rulebook that's like, I'm not kidding. Like reams and reams and reams of paper and the training takes several days or several weeks. I don't have a book for Via. I don't have. They gave us like a six-page power point and it’s just if the system is very intuitive like it should be even Apple, iPhone or Samsung. It's just intuitive like the icons lead you to the thing you want to do next. I would say in terms of our vehicle purchase, we're very pleased with our vehicles. It was not like the aha moments for us as the sliding doors are a little bit hard to close. They're not hard but they're heavy. If you're an older, adult, or person with the disability, you may have a difficult time sliding it.

There are times where drivers have to walk out. Just say in terms of vehicle acquisition, we really make sure that you can acquire at least one vehicle or test drive. One like have it on your lot for a day or two. We can put wheelchairs in and put different sizes people in it for big people or to little people, and service animals, the whole nine so you can really see how the whole thing gels. Do you have anything from you?

Karen: I totally forgot the question. What was it?

Phillippa: Any surprises? Any surprises from your pilot?

Karen: I think actually, we did kind of on the marketing word of mouth because we're county entity. We took advantage of all the things that the county advertises on. We thought that's where people would have heard from us, but actually because we ran the service for free, the biggest place that people heard about it from was from other people. Word of mouth. That was totally a surprise. I was surprised how quickly like it ramped up. I think the first day we carried 20, by day five we were carrying 100 people a day. It wasn't long before we were carrying over 200 people. It was crazy which does show and I don't think anybody that's in Gwinnett County or in the [inaudible 000:53:08] area were under transited making up words. There's definitely some transit opportunities, regardless of the mode within the county. I think that was pretty clear.

It was interesting just to see how different people used it. I mean some people are using it for travel to work, Some people are using it because the scenic highway is not safe to cross. It was a short journey walking, but they booked the microtransit. Now those people would go away once we charge a fare but that does kind of reveal some other things within the overall transportation infrastructure that, “Hey, we have a pedestrian issue in this corridor that people just don't feel safe crossing the street.” How can we work with other DOT Departments to maybe address that so that there are some things that kind of reveal themselves with that.

Andrew: Okay. All right. Another question would be, how does we go to find limited mobility?

Phillippa: Limited mobility. We don't. We allow the doctors to do this. We have an ADA document that they can take to their physician and the doctor can basically indicate whether or not they can access the vehicle and its current configuration. What we have found so far are the demand for ADA has not increased because pretty much the whole system is ADA compliant. There's just nothing you have to deal with. For us with our philosophy, we personally never purchase a vehicle that wasn't ADA accessible, we will just never have such a fleet.

Karen: I know for me, like as I'm thinking about this in the future, I also start to ask the question of how can we use the same fleet of vehicles if we both do microtransit and paratransit where you basically have people prequalified for a much bigger paratransit and microtransit zone. We then use the service and the technology to provide, can we do better than day before service for paratransit with that same model. I don't know if anybody's doing that yet. I know the technology is now being able to do it, but that's one question I have that I think will be answered pretty soon. That's the kind of the neatest thing about this space, well, there's many neat things about the space, but just how quickly it's evolving to customer demand way more so than maybe anything else that we normally deal with in public transit, which evolves at a less speedy pace.

Andrew: Okay. Excellent. For everyone who has requested either the RFP or anything like that, I'm going to put Phillippa’s and Karen's emails in the chat box when we wrap up so you can reach out to them about that. Let's see any other, oh question from Angeli for Phillippa. Have you looked at vendors that allow you to order the child integrated design seats? Normal seat with a portion that pulls out for children with safety belts.

Phillippa: We didn't, not this time around. There were some other important features about the vehicle that that we need it that were priority so we didn't. However I personally written on [inaudible 000:56:29] particularly Mercedes in Europe. You can find in Europe that has those child-integrated seats and I love them because they're like some type of plastic vinyl and they're just really easy to wipe down. We didn’t this time but we will next time around and depending on our ridership, if we have to expand the fleet, we will definitely look for those very types of seats. Feel free to send me an email if you have a recommendation.

Karen: I did not know that such a thing existed. I learned something today too.

Andrew: Let's see, I think we have time for one more question. Would either of you consider doing multiple zones or specific zones based on popular travel destination?

Karen: Gwinnett County has gone through two referendums recently, one in ‘19 and one in ‘20. In both plans that the referendum went out, we had a total of seven zones that would have gone out. It included Snellville and that kind of each zone sort of has a different shape, but again, kind of trying to focus around what population you are trying to move and then how do we connect. All of them would connect back to the system with fixed route and commuter service or something because with transit too, I mean we all know some preaching to the choir here. It has to be a connected network at the end of the day. We ran our pilot in a standalone zone, but ultimately everything would have been connected had that passed. Some are still moving that way, but just a little a little longer than we had hoped but yeah, we would have had multiple zones

Phillippa: I'll just add that, the neat thing about the Via algorithm is because we can determine where the demand is that is why we don't have zones. We can actually locate our vehicles and the parts of the county where the demand is there. We are still counting why we might go to zones in the future, but at this point we really don't see a need to.

Karen: It's all flexible about where, like I mentioned before, that's kind of neat about this stuff, which makes it hard to plan on your own but it does leave you some options to really do a better solution for whatever challenges there in your community more so than maybe some other modes will allow you to. You're muted Andrew.

Andrew: It doesn't matter how long you Zoom. There was one question that at least Zoom is telling me to fully believe that you had started typing to at least, but from Ned, how has ridership in Hall County changed with sudden setting of the fixed route and the switch to microtransit.

Phillippa: Yeah, we go basically overwhelmed both the demand response and fixed route ridership by two. It's twice the ridership. It just blew out of the water. We did that within the second month. Is it?

Andrew: That is excellent. All right. We are right on the mark with the time. Phillippa or Karen, do you have any final thoughts before we wrap up today?

Karen: Not too much. I mean, I may be reluctant to say this now, but we'll see what happens. I'm always willing to help out folks in the space. I think that's one of the great things about transit is that we're always willing to help each other out. See I received like three or four emails in my inbox. This is hard because none of us like to fail, but don't be afraid to push the envelope a little bit on this stuff. I know it's a fine line when you got elected officials and the public all but its technology and it's a little bit messier than normal. Maybe if you can help set the expectations because I think if you're able to push the bounds a little bit, you'll end up being a lot happier in the long run with the service that really truly fits the needs of the community. I'm always here to hold your hand for that.

Andrew: Okay and Phillippa anything else?

Phillippa: She has mentioned that if you need help call her? Karen is actually a really good teacher. I really do mean that means she came before I did and she shared her documents with me and walk through a ton of glossary of terms that was completely confusing. She really does share well and I'm happy to answer your questions as well.

Andrew: Excellent. Well thank you very much. Again in the chat box you can find their emails and we have been recording this webinar so we will post it on our website once it is processed and we have the transcript altogether. Other than that we have a survey, it should show up in your browser. Also I believe Zoom will send you an email with it. This is the first time we've ever done it, also let me know what happens, but please fill it out because we are always looking to make sure we do the best possible and create the best possible products for you. That is the best way to know that we're doing that. Again feel free to reach out to any of the four of us that are up here today for microtransit, Karen and Philippa in particular, but reach out. We look forward to hearing from you and thank you for joining us today.