

Connect Transit Board of Trustees
July 25, 2023, 4:30 p.m.
351 Wylie Drive, Normal, IL 61761 – Board Room
Regular Session Minutes – Approved at 9/26/23 Meeting

Chairman Ryan Whitehouse called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m.
Board Clerk, Janice Crago, recorded attendance via roll call.

Trustees Present: Trustee Judy Buchanan (Virtual)
Trustee Linda Foster
Vice Chair Julie Hile (Virtual)
Secretary Tim McCue
Trustee Mandava Rao
Trustee Barbara Singer
Chairman Ryan Whitehouse

Trustees Absent: None

City Managers Present: City Manager Tim Gleason

Staff Present: David Braun, General Manager
Aubrey Staton, Marketing Manager
Brady Lange, Procurement Director
Charlie Busse, Maintenance Manager
Janice Crago, Board Clerk
Pat Kuebrich, Finance Director
Shelly Perry, Operations Director
Stephanie Butler, HR Manager
Jon Spratt, Data Management Specialist

Guest(s) Present: Rod Wright, Senior Associate, Creative Entourage
Sydney Klarich, Brand Manager, Dovetail
Jennifer Schmid, Senior Director, Brand Strategy & Account
Management, Dovetail

Chairman Whitehouse called for a motion to approve virtual attendance for Vice Chair Hile due to reason two – employment purposes and Trustee Judy Buchanan due to reason one – personal illness, as stated in the by-laws.

Trustee Foster motioned; seconded by Secretary McCue.

Discussion:
There was no discussion.

Rollcall Vote:
AYE: Trustee Foster, Secretary McCue, Trustee Rao, Trustee Singer, Chairman Whitehouse
NAY: None

Motion to approve Vice Chair Hile and Trustee Buchanan to attend virtually was **approved**.

Chairman Whitehouse led the Board in the Pledge of Allegiance and read the Connect Transit Mission Statement.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

None

CONSENT AGENDA:

- a. Approval of Regular Session Minutes for June 27, 2023
- b. ~~Approval of Financial Information for June 2023~~ – *Delayed due to year end closing*
- c. Monthly Statistical Reports for June 2023
- d. Cardinal Infrastructure Federal Report
- e. Cornerstone – Illinois Weekly Update

Chairman Whitehouse called for a Motion to Approve the Consent Agenda.

Trustee Rao motioned; seconded by Trustee Foster.

Discussion:

David Braun, General Manager, stated that the Consent Agenda does not include financial reports for June 2023 due to year end close out and the time it takes to complete that task. He noted that we hope to have that information at our July meeting and reminded the Board that we do this every year. Mr. Braun noted that the June 2023 statistical reports reflect our year end data, showing our fixed route ridership increased 18.12%. He stated this is a tremendous increase considering we reduced peak service for a large portion of the year. Mr. Braun also noted that we had a small increase in service hours and miles by introducing the Sapphire Route. Mr. Braun shared the Connect Mobility reports reflect a 31% increase in ridership for the year but that it has flattened out over the last few months, and he is comfortable with our FY24 budgeted numbers. He further stated that the system wide numbers show the higher number of riders remains in our fixed route service, with only a slight change in numbers due to Connect Mobility. He also stated that at this time last year we were at 93 Operators, and we are now at 108 Operators, which allows us to return to full service. The report shows our Workers Comp hours decreased. With a Workers Comp evaluation every three years, we are hoping our Works Comp cost will decrease with the next evaluation.

Mr. Braun stated the Cardinal Infrastructure report does not contain a lot of new information but that we are continuing conversations with Cardinal regarding upcoming discretionary funding, which he will elaborate on in his General Manager's report. The Cornerstone report shows the state is still working through the details of the bills that have passed, with no further activity at the state level.

Chairman Whitehouse stated he is pleased that ridership is up. He stated that he is glad to see Mobility ridership is also up, but he hopes it is indeed flattening out.

Rollcall Vote:

AYE: Trustee Buchanan, Trustee Foster, Vice Chair Hile, Secretary McCue, Trustee Rao, Trustee Singer, Chairman Whitehouse

NAY: None

Consent Agenda was **approved**.

NEW BUSINESS:

a. Messaging Campaign Update – Informational

Discussion:

Mr. Braun stated that last year the Board approved moving forward with a creative messaging campaign with Dovetail. Dovetail is still developing that campaign due to the complexity of the community perception and gathering their beliefs before they can start messaging to the community. Mr. Braun stated Aubrey Staton, Marketing Manager, has been working with Dovetail since the Board approved the messaging campaign.

Ms. Staton stated that in September 2022, this Board approved staff to move forward with strategic messaging consultant services provided by Dovetail and their subconsultant Creative Entourage, who would engage community partners, build public confidence in Connect Transit, and establish a positive value image that may lead to increased ridership.

Dovetail and Creative Entourage have been working closely with staff to gather public perception and information from several groups in our community.

Ms. Staton introduced Rod Wright with Creative Entourage.

Mr. Wright explained their role was to gather public opinion and do market research, with the fieldwork for the telephone survey now complete. He stated the fieldwork went very well, with 401 interviews completed. Mr. Wright stated they are now determining what they learned from the survey, breaking the results down by category, finding the next steps, and compiling an executive summary to share. Mr. Wright shared they have also begun work on the rider survey, to have ready for field implementation in early September.

Sydney Klarich and Jennifer Schmid from Dovetail stated that once the ridership survey is complete, they will move into creative development for the messaging platform.

Ms. Staton explained that once she receives the survey results, she will present them to the Board.

Completed steps:

- Identified key stakeholders
- Conducted key stakeholder interviews
- Developed input session discussion guide
- Identified input session participants
- Conducted input sessions
- Developed phone survey
- Conducted phone surveys

Next steps:

- Review input session and phone survey results
- Create rider survey questions
- Conduct rider survey on vehicles and online
- Develop messaging for presentation to the Board

Trustee Foster asked if there is an anticipated timeline for completion. Ms. Staton explained the original timeline called for an end of September 2023 completion. However, many of the stakeholder interviews took much longer than expected and the rider surveys need to take place when the students are back in town since they comprise 40% of our ridership. As a result, we have extended the completion date to the end of December 2023. Ms. Staton explained there is no extra cost for this extension because the contract is for completion of the project, not for a specific date.

b. Return to Full Service – Informational

Discussion:

Shelly Perry, Operations Director, stated that during the summer and fall of 2022 Connect Transit, like many other transit agencies across the U.S., experienced a strain on its workforce due to prolonged employee shortages. We only had 85 of the 105 Operators needed to provide full scheduled service. Due to these shortages the decision was made to reduce peak service, late night service, and weekend service. This reduction was meant to prevent “burnout” of our existing employees, improve safety, and to allow HR, Operations, Safety, and Maintenance staff time to recruit, onboard and train new employees, with a focus on Bus Operators.

Since reducing service in 2022, we increased the starting wages for Operators and Maintenance employees, provided hiring incentives and held monthly training classes that have helped us build up the number of Bus Operators in our ranks. The Operations team has been monitoring our progress toward replenishing the number of employees needed to begin restoring service to regular scheduled levels. Earlier this year we recommended restoring weekend service, and it was successfully restored June 4, 2023. Further review of our staffing levels indicates that we can take the final step in returning to full service by restoring routine peak and late night service on Sunday, August 20, 2023, in time for the return of ISU students. It should be noted that we will operate one Redbird Express bus on a 20-minute frequency starting on July 13, to accommodate trips for shopping and groceries to students moving into ISU during that week.

The restoration of service will return Connect Transit’s service to its regularly scheduled and budgeted levels.

Chairman Whitehouse asked if this hiring includes FLEX drivers? Mr. Braun explained the FLEX drivers are a different category of driver and we are continuing to hire for both FLEX and fixed route.

Trustee Singer asked if the FLEX driver is a different category because it does not require a CDL? Mr. Braun confirmed that it is different because it does not require a CDL and because we bargained for a different rate with the Union.

Trustee McCue asked what our plan is to share the information with the community? Ms. Perry stated we will put it on all social media platforms, a press release will be issued, the annunciator on the buses will announce the information, and it will be on the infotainment screens.

c. Authorize the General Manager to establish a Universal Access Agreement with the Promise Council.

Chairman Whitehouse called for a motion to authorize the General Manager to establish a Universal Agreement with the Promise Council.

Trustee Singer motioned; seconded by Trustee Foster.

Discussion:

Mr. Braun stated that before he started as General Manager Connect had a pilot program with District 87 to offer rides to students who needed transportation that their school buses could not provide. That pilot fell to the wayside for many reasons and late last year it was brought back, with the Promise Council stepping forward to fund the service.

Ms. Staton explained the Promise Council was established in 2009 to address the declining high school graduation rates in Bloomington-Normal by removing barriers to education. Their mission is to create a sustainable network of caring adults to connect and engage community resources that remove barriers to learning so all children can achieve success through education.

The Promise Council at Bloomington High School has worked with Connect Transit to provide public transportation to students in need in the past. This agreement will formalize that process and will be valid through July 31, 2024.

The agreement states that Connect Transit will provide photo identification cards for students in need of public transportation as identified by the Promise Council. These IDs will allow those students to take public transportation on any of our fixed route buses. The photo keeps them secure to reduce the likelihood of unauthorized use by others.

The Promise Council has asked us to provide IDs for 12 students. Students are recommended to the Promise Council by Bloomington High School Guidance staff as needing public transportation. Besides discounted transportation, these students will learn how to use public transportation as an alternative to driving, which is a valuable life skill and may create a long-term transit rider.

The Promise Council will pay a discounted monthly pass rate of \$20/month/student.

Chairman Whitehouse stated he believes this is a great idea and fits the mission of Connect Transit by giving access to opportunity and enriching individuals lives.

Trustee Foster feels it is an excellent opportunity to engage the community, and asked if the pass is only for school use or anytime the student needs it? Ms. Staton stated the pass is for the student to use anytime they need it.

Trustee Buchanan stated it is a wonderful idea and that she is pleased we are able to offer this for the students. She asked if the contract is with the Promise Council or District 87? Ms. Staton stated it is with the Promise Council at District 87.

Chairman Whitehouse asked Ms. Staton to share what the Promise Council is. Ms. Staton explained they are a non-profit council that helps eliminate barriers to education, they work with the school districts to engage with community partners and parent groups to provide opportunities for students. She stated the Promise Council at Bloomington High School is student led.

Vice Chair Hile stated she feels it is a marvelous service and asked if this will be treated as a pilot and what the potential for growth might be? Ms. Staton said it is not a pilot, that a pilot was done previously but then Connect went zero fare due to COVID, so the program did not have a chance to grow. Based on the pilot, there is room for growth because it was well used and there will be students added by the Guidance Counselors with the simple send of an email.

Rollcall Vote:

AYE: Trustee Buchanan, Trustee Foster, Vice Chair Hile, Secretary McCue, Trustee Rao, Trustee Singer, Chairman Whitehouse

NAY: None

The motion to authorize the General Manager to establish a Universal Access Agreement with the Promise Council was **approved**.

- d. Authorize the General Manager to allow zero fare rides in exchange for riders showing their current Normal of Bloomington Public Library Card on all fixed route, Connect Mobility, and Connect FLEX vehicles.

Chairman Whitehouse called for a motion to authorize the General Manager to allow zero fare rides in exchange for riders showing their current Normal of Bloomington Public Library Card on all fixed route, Connect Mobility, and Connect FLEX vehicles.

Trustee McCue motioned; seconded by Trustee Rao.

Discussion:

Ms. Staton stated that last year Connect Transit partnered with both the Bloomington and Normal Public Libraries to offer rides without requiring a fare if riders were able to produce a valid library card. This was in support of library card sign-up month, which takes place in September each year. Several other Illinois communities also participate in similar fashion.

Both Bloomington and Normal Public Libraries saw a significant increase in new library card sign-ups in 2022, in part due to our promotion and support. Normal's library card sign ups increased by over 300% from 343 in 2021 to 1,076 in 2023. Bloomington also saw a large increase from 285 sign ups in 2021 to 421 in 2022. Connect Transit provided 19,970 zero fare rides because of this partnership, out of a total ridership for the month of 225,983.

Library cards will not be swiped or scanned; they will just be shown to the driver. We will provide examples of current library cards, so drivers know what to look for. This will not cause a strain on our IT department or Operators.

The financial impact is estimated to be \$16,500. This was determined by looking at the number of full fare and discounted fare rider percentages and using an estimate of 20,000 rides.

Trustee Foster asked how we will spread the word on this campaign? Ms. Staton stated that it is a shared campaign with Bloomington and Normal libraries, and we will also do social media announcements, press releases, advertising on the buses, and continued signage.

Rollcall Vote:

AYE: Trustee Buchanan, Trustee Foster, Vice Chair Hile, Secretary McCue, Trustee Rao, Trustee Singer, Chairman Whitehouse

NAY: None

The motion to the General Manager to allow zero fare rides in exchange for riders showing their current Normal of Bloomington Public Library Card on all fixed route, Connect Mobility, and Connect FLEX vehicles was **approved**.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT:

Chairman Whitehouse thanked Trustee Singer, City Manager Gleason, and the varied City representatives for attending the FLEX ribbon cutting. He stated he is excited about the service and looks forward to what it can do for the riders.

GENERAL MANAGER'S REPORT:

Mr. Braun shared his monthly General Manager report.

Government:

We received notice from Senator Durbin's office that we are in the bill for Congressionally Directed Spending funding.

- Congressionally Directed Spending
 - \$800,000 for safety equipment, including:
 - Radios
 - Collision avoidance system
 - Facility security improvements
 - Not guaranteed, still to be voted on
- Transit Center Grant Obligation Process
 - Draft grant application submitted to FTA
 - Draft IGA and lease agreement submitted to FTA
 - Anticipate comments and suggestions by mid to late August
- Cornerstone Extension
 - Instrumental in securing additional \$3 million in state funding for transit center
 - Extended for one year
 - Within GM spending authority

Community:

Outreach

- FLEX Kick-Off Event
- Kite Fest
- Saturday on the Square
- Young Men's Club
- FLEX Informational at Miller Park
- Club Connect at Boys & Girls Club

Connect FLEX Statistics:

- 290 Accounts created since launch of the service
- 84 Riders made at least one ride request since launch

- 44 Riders completed more than one booking since launch
- 28 Riders completed more than two bookings since launch
- 7 Riders completed more than five bookings since launch
- Average pickup ETA has been 6-21 minutes
- Average ride duration has been 7-21 minutes

Employee Welfare

- Ice Cream Social – 2023

Recruiting:

Positions Filled:

- Executive Assistant for Procurement (1)
- Marketing Assistant (1)
- Microtransit Operator (4)

Positions Open:

- Bus Operator (8)
- Dispatcher (1)
- Mechanic (2)
- Microtransit Operator (6)
- Operations Manager for On-Demand Services (1)
- Service Technician (3)

Offers Extended and Accepted:

- Mechanic (1)

Employee Development:

- First two groups of Microtransit Operators have completed their training and are in service.
- Annual Training Update:
 - 76% of employees have completed their required annual training, with the remainder to be finished no later than August 31, 2023.
- Brady Lange, Procurement Director, attended the National Transit Institute Procurement I course in Fort Worth, Texas.
 - The four-day foundational course provided an overview of transit procurement and emphasized “best practices” for contract procurements by FTA grantees.

Mr. Braun invited the Trustees to attend our Business Before Hours event on Wednesday, July 26 at 7:00 a.m. in the garage. He explained this is an event we put on with the Chamber of Commerce and that no Board business will be discussed.

TRUSTEE COMMENTS:

Secretary McCue asked if we have any thoughts of where we hoped to be compared to where we actually are with FLEX at this point? Mr. Braun stated we did not really know what to expect, but that we can ask Via how this compares with other launches. However, each system will vary based on advertising, implementation process, etc. We awarded this contract in March, and we rolled it out in July, which is a very quick turnaround, and we have to take that plan into consideration when we look

at our numbers. Mr. Braun stated our long term expectation is that it operates at least as efficiently as Connect Mobility, if not more efficiently.

Vice Chair Hile stated she would like to make a full report to the Board on the Transit Board Members conference she attended last week because it was an exceptionally good seminar. She was reminded that it was a beautifully curated retreat opportunity for Board members, and she hopes there can be discussion on the Board attending as a unit next year.

Trustee Buchanan wanted to thank Connect for their hard work and outreach, it all leads to greater awareness, increased ridership, education to the public and she congratulated everyone for their wonderful work.

Trustee Rao shared his appreciation of projects like the Promise Council and the library cardholder pass.

Secretary McCue reminded everyone that new student move in starts August 14, with the first day of school being August 21.

Trustee Foster echoed what others have said and shared her excitement that Connect is serving every area of the community and encouraged them to continue to do so.

EXECUTIVE SESSION:

No Executive Session was held.

ADJOURNMENT:

Chairman Whitehouse called for a Motion to Adjourn.

Trustee Foster motioned; seconded by Trustee Singer.

Meeting adjourned by consensus at 5:19 p.m.



Trustee Tim McCue, Board Secretary



Janice Crago, Board Clerk

[SEAL]

