



January 2024

PEOPLE. COMMUNITY. ECONOMY. ENVIRONMENT.

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## GM Notes ~ David Braun

Connect Transit has been busy enhancing our services to meet the needs of our customers and the communities we serve. As you may know, we introduced a new service, Connect FLEX, last year to serve areas that are difficult or inefficient to serve with a large bus.

Connect FLEX has been operational since July 16, 2023, just shy of six months of service. As of January 1, nearly 26,000 rides have been provided to members of our community traveling within the southwest corner of Bloomington. Over 900 unique riders have tried this new service since our launch last summer. We've received great feedback from our riders about Connect FLEX and hope to be able to expand the service over the next year. Riders themselves have said -

*"My life depends on Connect FLEX."*

*"I love this program. You should expand the service zones!"*

*"I am very happy and grateful for this service and have spread the word!"*

We are not resting yet! As you will see in this newsletter, we are continuing to make improvements to our system by moving forward with our transit center in partnership with the City of Bloomington and working on a few other large scale projects. Over the next few years Connect Transit will be investing the federal and state grant funds that we were awarded to make investments that benefit our entire community and Connect Transit's operations. We would like to thank our U.S. Senators Durbin and Duckworth, Congressman LaHood, former Congressman Davis, new Congressman Sorensen, and our State Representatives for their hard work and continued support in securing funds. As your transit system, we have an obligation to make our service as attractive and effective as we can while improving efficiency and value. You will see throughout this newsletter what we are doing to develop the transit system you and our community deserve now, and in the future.

Here's what's  
inside!

- Reimagining Our Investments
- Transit Center Update

## Reimagining Our Investments

Over the past few years we have received funding for electric vehicles (EV) and facilities from the federal Bus and Bus Facilities grant program, Rebuild Illinois Grant during Rounds 1, 2, and 3 of that program, and Congressionally Directed Spending led by Senator Durbin for Connect Transit's EV and infrastructure program. Since then, we have been planning and preparing to use those funds to enhance our services and provide the best and greatest impact on transit riders and non-riders alike.



**Electric Infrastructure:** The challenge of having electric buses in our fleet is that they are reliant on the electric power grid, but the electric supply to and from the grid is being stretched thin. We recognize that we need resiliency against power outages to continue to provide the service our community expects. To that end, we are working closely with Corn Belt Energy Cooperative and Wabash Valley Power to determine the feasibility of developing a microgrid to serve Connect Transit's energy and resiliency needs. The microgrid would consist of a solar array on our property that would charge a battery, which could be used to charge our buses during peak power times

or in the event of a power outage. Corn Belt and Wabash Valley will benefit from the ability to use some of the energy stored in the battery to level off peak production and relieve stress on the grid.

**Facilities:** Two of the grant awards will help us plan and develop a training facility for our employees and storage facility to accommodate vehicle expansion. We don't have the opportunity to build facilities often and believe the public funding is best used if more parties can benefit. We found that zero emission bus (ZEB) maintenance training is lacking in the industry and is mostly provided by manufacturers, so we are collaborating with Heartland Community College (HCC) to develop a heavy-duty EV training program that can support large buses, trucks, and agricultural equipment at our facility. Since the facility is yet to be built, we have a blank slate to design what is needed for our shared purposes.

With over \$1.7 billion in federal transit funding being invested in ZEBs, and more money being invested to electrify other heavy-duty equipment, there will be an ongoing need for qualified and trained maintenance employees, and it is exciting to think they might be trained right here in Bloomington-Normal.

We also recognize that many of the surrounding rural transit providers do not have the maintenance resources to maintain the transit related aspects of their vehicles, such as lifts and mobility device securement. Since we are at the cross-roads of major highways and centralized in the state, we have proposed to be a regional maintenance provider for other federal and state supported rural transit agencies. If we are selected by the state, the facility will be developed to meet the needs of rural providers and will provide additional employment opportunities for students coming from HCC's program, our existing staff, and will develop a mechanic pipeline for other transit agencies and our community.

As you can see, Connect Transit's positive reach is far more than simply providing public transportation, our investments and developments consider and benefit a larger group of our entire community.

## Downtown Transit Center Update

Connect Transit and the City of Bloomington have made great progress on the Downtown Bloomington Transit Center within recent months. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements were recently finished and have been approved by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and allows the project to enter the design phase. In conjunction with the City, we will soon be seeking proposals from architecture and engineering (A & E) firms that will assist us through the complex A & E process. During that phase, the design and layout of the facility will begin to take shape. During the NEPA process we developed a few conceptual designs for the future facility to show "proof of concept" - below is one such example.

In this concept, all buses will enter and exit the transit center from Market Street. Passengers will board or disembark at the raised platform areas (in darker gray). Each of our routes will have a designated bay with signage at the center allowing passengers to easily find their bus. Careful consideration will be given to bus movements so that buses can safely maneuver throughout the facility without being impacted by other



buses. A preliminary traffic study was done in conjunction with the NEPA process to ensure we are not negatively impacting traffic in the downtown area. In addition, we have begun studying the routes into and out of downtown to understand the impact on future bus schedules.

This concept also includes space that will be used for additional amenities and a climate-controlled waiting area. In this scenario this transit center waiting area is located in a "liner building" that is between the bus bays and Center Street providing easy access for passengers from either direction. In addition, parts of the "liner building" will likely include some leasable indoor commercial space. Connect Transit will use the revenues generated by leasable space to help offset the operating costs of the new facility. The concept shown also includes a City of Bloomington funded parking structure that is built above the transit center. This ensures the necessary level of parking required for Downtown Bloomington's growth and development and also provides a roof over the transit center.

As we begin the design process the chosen A & E contractor will carefully consider the historic nature of Downtown Bloomington, as well as the Downtown Bloomington Streetscape Plan currently in progress, to ensure the building and parking deck fit into the vision and aesthetic concept for Downtown Bloomington. Careful consideration will be paid to design elements that directly impact the accessibility of the entire block for people with limited mobility or people using mobility devices. The design of the facility will include accessibility features such as elevators, ramps, handrails, and accessible wayfinding signage.

During the planning phases of this project, we will take time to consider the needs of our passengers as well as our community. During these brainstorming activities, we will define the amenities that are considered important elements of the final design of this project. We anticipate designing climate-controlled passenger waiting areas, benches, trash receptacles, public and family restrooms, elevators, bike storage, vending machines, on-site security, and Connect Transit customer service. We are looking forward to gathering more ideas from our employees, our passengers, and our community.

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Dear Connect Abby,

Why do you need to do all of this extra stuff? You should focus on providing transit!

Sincerely,  
StickToTransit

Dear StickToTransit,

We believe that being good stewards of public tax dollars means providing more than just good transportation. In everything that we do, we consider the impact we can have on our local community, economy, environment, and most importantly - people. By expanding our impact to our community, we provide a greater return on the investment in public transit and a better public transportation experience for our riders!

See you on the bus!

*Connect Abby*