

CONNECT TRANSIT BOARD OF TRUSTEES
BOARD MEETING MINUTES – JULY 27, 2021

351 Wylie Drive
Connect Transit – Board Room
Normal, Illinois 61761

A meeting of the Board of Trustees of Connect Transit was held on July 27, 2021, at 4:30 p.m. in the Connect Transit Board Room.

TRUSTEES PRESENT: Trustee Judy Buchanan - (arrived at 4:34 p.m.)
Trustee Linda Foster
Vice-Chairman Julie Hile - (arrived at 4:32 p.m.)
Trustee Tim McCue
Trustee Deb Presley
Trustee Mandava Rao
Chairman Ryan Whitehouse

CITY MANAGERS: Town of Normal Manager Pam Reece – (arrived at 4:34 p.m.)
Bloomington Deputy City Manager, Billy Tyus - Present

STAFF PRESENT: Mark Peterson, Interim General Manager
Jill Baxter, Board Clerk
Steve Stockton, IT Manager
Jon Spratt, IT Specialist
Patrick Kuebrich, Finance Director
Jeff Holtke, Marketing Manager
Brendan O’Neill, Outreach Coordinator
Brady Lange, Maintenance Manager / Procurement
Shelly Perry, Operations Manager

The regular Board Meeting of the Connect Transit Board of Trustees was called to order by Chairman Ryan Whitehouse at 4:30 p.m. Roll call was taken and Trustee Presley led the Board in the Pledge of Allegiance.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments.

CONSENT AGENDA

1. Approval of June 15, June 18, June 22, and June 30, 2021, Board Meeting and Candidate Screening committee Meeting Minutes
2. Disbursements for the month of June 2021

3. Monthly Statistical Report for June 2021
4. Cardinal Infrastructure Federal Report (*Addendum*)
5. Cornerstone Illinois Weekly Update

Chairman Whitehouse called for a *Motion to Approve the Consent Agenda*. Trustee McCue so moved, seconded by Trustee Rao.

Rollcall vote:

AYE: Trustee Foster; Trustee McCue; Trustee Presley; Trustee Rao; Chairman Whitehouse

NAY: None.

The Board approved the *Consent Agenda*.

NEW BUSINESS

Recommendation for Approval of Fiscal Year 2022 Marketing Plan

Chairman Whitehouse entertained a *Motion for Recommendation for Approval of Fiscal Year 2022 Market Plan*, moved by Trustee Rao, seconded by Trustee Foster.

Interim General Manager Peterson stated he had a couple of introductory comments and then he will turn the floor over to Jeff Holtke, Marketing Manager. Brendan O'Neill is also here today and they work together on a variety of marketing and business outreach activities and communications. Annually, at this time of year – the start of our fiscal year, we come to the Board with a *Marketing and Communications Plan*. This is focused on our ad buying for the first 6 months of the year. In another six months, we will bring another plan in front of the Board. These are all budgeted funds with flexibility if we need additional funding.

Mr. Holtke stated that similarly as in years past, we have met with several of the groups in town and some out of town to look at ways to get our message out in the community. We work really closely with some of the radio partners in town for various things such as the *Stuff the Bus* promotion and our *Night in a Car* promotion. We met with each one of them and they brought in different proposals ranging from their smallest packages to their most expensive ones. We have put together a well-rounded plan which is buying the real estate as the messaging can be changed throughout the year. The initial push in August would be for the mobile ticketing app. Currently, we have about 114 active users and he would like to see that number steadily climb over the next few months. We want to clear up some confusion with having two different apps and want to differentiate between the two. He wants to push out really strong that we do have a new mobile ticketing app available. Mr. Holtke stated that one thing that he always wanted to do was streaming radio services. He stated that Heartland Community College does a lot of that in addition to various other folks in town. If we go through Pandora, the minimum ad buy is about \$10,000. Fortunately, through our partners at Neuhoff Media, they can lower that minimum buy so that it would be really nice to get into Pandora, Stitcher Tune-in and I-Heart Radio. Those would reach target specific zip codes. Unlike television, where there is a lot

of wasted spillage over into the Peoria markets, we are really excited to do the zip code specific targeting. As in years past, WGLT and Great Plains Media are our main partners for our *Stuff the Bus* promotion. We are also looking to do a lot of additional trade on top of this for window ads on our buses to get more exposure through more ads such as *Hot100* and *Rock 96.7*. Currently, we are in a very good spot as far as limited availability on the buses so we are going to push those onto windows. However, it is very nice to report that our bus advertising is really good right now. We are down to only 15 open panels on the buses. We have been pushing that hard as businesses have been reopening. You can see there are some new things we have done this year such as *Sophos Marketing* ads which are the digital ads when you go onto different websites. We can get 100,000 monthly impressions with a really nice dashboard for reporting purposes. Signs we tried for the *One Rate For All* promotion and various other things, is using up some of our inventory space on our buses so allowing \$1,000 will go a long way for vinyl signs and we will push some signage out on the buses like we did for other promotions. We have budgeted for Facebook/Twitter and Instagram. Community events (table events) is one thing that we try not to spend a lot because we do so many of them, but this allows us to be able to get into those job fairs that are going on in the community for our hiring shortages and various other community events when there may be a small entry fee to have a table. Brendan heads up that community outreach and this gives us a little more flexibility if there are Chamber events such as the "walk-up" job fair that was held at the mall and other things. The total of \$29,340 is approximately one-half of what he budgets for the whole year. This way we are only doing a 6-month run and once our new GM gets here, Mr. Holtke stated that he will take him around and introduce him to all of the media partners and then we can sit down with him and figure out what we want to do for the remaining half of the year. This is the overall idea for the next 6 months. The messaging could always change like it did in 2020. We changed our message quite often with the changing times. We only need about 1.5 weeks turnaround time to come up with a script, have it produced and get it live on the air or the other listed outlets. Mr. Holtke stated that the one thing he really wanted to push was our new app.

Update on Website Redesign

Mr. Holtke stated that the redesign is coming right along and we saw the preliminary design about two weeks ago. We gave them a few notes and now they are moving on to the internal pages of the website and is right on schedule. Our agreement with the current provider expires January 1 so this site will be tested and ready to go so that there won't be any lapse. We are aiming for January 1 (if not earlier). Right now it is just a "skeleton" and none of the links work but once it is more functional, he will come back and give the Board another update. All of the Directors are really excited to see the new one as compared to the old one. The functionality is going to be great and it is visually appealing and a lot easier to navigate for our riders. Riders will not have to click three different links to get to our routes and maps and will be right there on the main page and drops down stating rider alerts – anything and everything riders need. We were really excited once we saw the first design what the future of our website will look like.

Trustee Presley inquired at what point will we be able to engage with the disability community to make sure that it is functional?

Mr. Holtke responded that was something that we brought up when we met with them on our first design meeting. We told them we want it up and running so that there is no overlap. This fall, once the links are all working and up and running, we will set up with limited groups to make certain their screen readers will be able to read it. He is pretty confident it will with the tools that Cybernautic has and that we have seen on the Regional Office of Education's website. They have a great widget that does all sorts of things. Once we dump all of the information from our old site into our new site and it is actually functional, we will start getting it out to you so that you can test it out.

Interim General Manager Peterson added that once we have functionality, we will get it out to the Board so that you can play with it and look around and you may see some things we missed that you want to consider adding.

Mr. Holtke stated that the designer is on vacation for two weeks but when he gets back this week, he is going to start working on the interior of the website and that's when it will come to life. Right now we are working on where we want things laid out and positioned on the site but so far you are going to find it will be a major upgrade from what we have now.

Trustee Presley stated that in addition to LifeCil and MARC Center, we might also want to send it to the *Office of Disability* at ISU and how we might be able to partner with them.

Trustee McCue stated that he would be happy to make some connections and reach out for conversations at ISU.

Chairman Whitehouse commented that is a great idea to talk to the university people that specialize at this and might be able to give us even better pointers on how to communicate on the website.

Trustee Presley stated that each one of them serve different populations and so MARC Center would look at the individuals in developmental disabilities and LifeCil is going to have more of those who are blind or hard of hearing. ISU would have that college-aged community. That is three very different types of populations that would be good for input.

Trustee Buchanan stated that she was struck by a number of things. The flexibility and the fact that we have a good plan in place while we are waiting on David to come on board, so she thinks we could expect some tweaking and some new ideas. "Get Connected" is a good tagline. To the extent of the new apps, she understands that those can be problematic – both for our more dependent consistent riders as well as the choice riders. In addition to promotion, can you do any testing with small groups because she believes that may be a small barrier to someone who is looking at riding, but isn't really comfortable with the apps.

Mr. Holtke responded that we have worked with the Promise Council. Last year right before everything shut down, we were running a pilot program with the Promise Council for some students at Bloomington High School that may need rides to different events. They are going to be giving a couple of them access to the app instead of a card. That would be a small test group to see what common questions pop up with high school independent transportation. The whole ConnectU program, we will

also be working that into it and engaging with different groups in the community would not be far-fetched at all.

Trustee Buchanan asked if we have identified any other groups in addition to the high school students, which is wonderful as they are our future choice riders.

Mr. Holtke stated that we do not have a running list but we could certainly work on that.

Mr. Peterson stated that if the Board Members have any suggestions, please pass them along.

Trustee Buchanan is struck by the people that are not as comfortable at their age and ability levels.

Mr. Holtke stated that is what the ConnectU program does and we have started to ramp that back up and we were out at the History Museum with their day camp campers and various other groups. It's getting out and teaching them about the bus with e-ticketing and paying for rides through their phones.

Brendan O'Neill, Outreach Coordinator, added that since we are starting to ramp up events as well, he has his phone in his pocket so he can show riders how it is used.

Mr. Holtke stated that now that the app is working, we will do a lot more "how-to" videos. If riders are more visual and they want to see it at their leisure. The YouTube videos will also be out there so that we can push people to that link also.

Trustee Buchanan added that maybe we could even promote that with some employers for their employees.

There was no further discussion.

Rollcall vote:

AYE: Trustee Buchanan; Vice-Chairman Hile; Trustee McCue; Trustee Presley; Trustee Rao;
Chairman Whitehouse

NAY: None.

The Board unanimously approved the *Recommendation for Approval of Fiscal Year 2022 Market Plan*.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman stated that he has asked Mr. Peterson and Staff to give us a ridership update since we have started collecting fares.

Mr. Peterson stated that Jon Spratt is here and Mr. Spratt is our Data Specialist and Shelly Perry is also here and Ms. Perry is our Operations Manager. Mr. Pat Kuebrich, Finance Director, is also here. Mr. Peterson stated that he has asked them to put together a little presentation for the Board on ridership

data. We only have a full month of data and have some anecdotal information from July but we have June data and it is still early but we thought we would share with you what we are seeing so far and what we expect to see in the coming months. We will come back to you in 6-7 months with a clearer picture on what is happening with our ridership.

Ms. Perry stated it has been a while since we have given the Board a ridership update. We have broken it down into miles and hours, ridership, and revenue so you can see how the past year and 3 months have affected ridership so that we can get a clearer picture of what we have going on.

Miles and Hours

During the pandemic we reduced service on some routes to address both the lower demand and also to encourage essential trips. We wanted to make certain that we provided a safe environment for everybody. We also increased the frequency of our cleaning on our buses. We were cleaning buses on average 4-5 hours and cycling through the cleaning cycle every 4-5 hours. This caused a decrease in revenue miles and hours and an increase in our non-revenue miles and hours. Buses returning to the garage for cleanings increased our non-revenue miles by about 4 times the normal amount.

Mr. Peterson clarified that revenue miles is transit talk and in fact, that is one of the first questions our new GM asked. It is an important statistic in the transit world and something we watch carefully.

Ms. Perry continued by stating that we are currently at our pre-pandemic service levels, so that is good. We are still sanitizing 4-6 hours every day because we are currently transitioning and we are not certain how things are going to progress so we are continuing that for now until we go into full service in August. That may change depending on what is going on and we may keep it the way it is or we may continue with our plan.

Ridership

We still have a dramatic decrease in ridership over the past year and 3 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, essential trips became a priority for our riders due to the nationwide concerns regarding safety and social distancing. We took a lot of precautions right away when the COVID pandemic hit. We implemented a lot in March and April to make certain our passengers were safe. We immediately started our "back door" boarding; installed driver barriers; suspended the collection of fares; implemented the bus cleaning rotation every 4-6 hours; and implemented social distancing guidelines in accordance with CDC and Illinois State COVID mandates which included eliminating the amount of people on the bus. This made our passengers feel very safe and that we provided them with a good environment to travel in. Typically, in the past during low times of ridership nationwide, our agency has always had higher ridership than our peer agencies. We hope that the attention and quick actions to increased public safety maintained our ridership numbers as much as possible. We cannot currently compare ourselves to other peer agencies because that information has not been reported to NTB so we cannot pull that information to compare ourselves to our peers. We are hoping to report the comparisons in the near future. Ridership has also been negatively affected by high unemployment levels as well as a high adoption rate of work-from-home models by employees.

We expected to regain most of our ridership losses that we have experienced since March 2020. However, some ridership loss may be permanent because employers may not choose to bring their employees back to offices and provide a work-at-home option as a permanent option. Our ridership is currently down 25% when compared to pre-pandemic levels. All ridership data can be found in our monthly Board reporting.

Revenue

We have operated fare-free since March 2020 and on June 1, 2021, we resumed fare collection and the fare increase that was originally scheduled for March 2020. This increase for fares increased the fare for fixed route by \$.25 and decreased the fare for mobility riders at a minimum of \$.75 and in some cases more based on the mobility zones. The mobility zones no longer exist so it is one-fare for everybody and is \$1.25 for all passengers no matter where they are going in the incorporated area. Another implementation on June 1, 2021, was the mobile ticketing. This was rolled out at the same time as the fare increases and it allows riders to use the fare-capping feature. Since most of our passengers are fixed route riders, this is expected to have a slight negative affect on ridership but a positive affect overall on revenue. Due to the timing of everything happening on June 1, 2021, at this time it is really hard for us to tell you how everything is impacted and what is impacting ridership. We are hoping that in about 6 months' time – end of December and the beginning of January, once we get those numbers in, we will be able to give you a very clear picture of what is going on in ridership and our metrics. Our fare increase seems to be going well so far. We have only had a 5.3 decrease in total fare revenue from June 2021 when compared to June 2019. Considering the decrease in ridership, this is a very minimal amount of revenue loss. We expect a decrease in revenue in the short term but an increase in the long term. More data is needed again to determine the overall change. If you actually look at the numbers, overall total revenue, we have only had a \$3,467 dollar decrease since 2019. When you look at 2020 when we were not collecting fares, and if you look at that, that is not quite as bad as we thought it would be.

Mr. Peterson added that some of the questions that we are anxious to answer related to the fare change, the One-Rate-For-All and what the impact will be of the increase of the fixed route fare. Economic models would indicate that there will be some impact as you raise the price, you have an impact on demand. However, a lot of our riders are dependent riders and may not have choices. We will watch that to see that impact. Again, trying to also control for the COVID impact because he thinks that we still have some employers in town who have not returned to normal operations and there are still people who are working from home and that may continue forever in some cases. We also see, particularly with the service industry, overall employment levels are down and those are some of the riders that we rely on so it remains to be seen what happens with that group of riders. Trying to control for the COVID impact – what is the impact of the One-Rate-For-All? We are already seeing a very early uptick in Connect Mobility. As you would expect, the plan would make that more assessable but the question he has is – what kind of an impact – increasing ridership but for what reason? Are we finding that the Connect Mobility riders are now using Connect Mobility for other things, maybe things that they couldn't afford in the past and they were using it just for absolute essential travel and now maybe they are using it for choice travel to go shopping, movie theatre, or whatever, which would be a positive outcome but that question is yet to be answered. That is where the data will hopefully help us answer

the question. The other is being able to benchmark with other systems. Where do we stand? Are our trends aligning with other systems that in comparable communities; are we different and how and why are we different? These are all questions that ultimately data will answer. Right now we still collect a lot of data but a lot of the data we do collect comes through the farebox and we have not had the opportunity to do that for a while so we are not in a great position to show you trends and that is what the data will show over time. Hopefully, by the end of the year – maybe January, things will start to become a little clearer and we can sit down and have a more sophisticated conversation about what is happening with our ridership. The electronic farebox is still new and we are still trying to understand that as well. There are a lot of new things that we are dealing with out there that will, in the long run, be very beneficial to our ability to track trends.

DISCUSSION

Trustee Buchanan inquired whether we have had any verbal input from anyone from our fixed riders and others?

Ms. Perry responded that we have not but have received comments from riders that were glad we were running the whole time and that we didn't impede service. For us, we have been provided service the whole time so it has really not affected service. A lot of it is positives about the mobile app and the fare-capping, and the accessibility of the mobility app. As Mr. Peterson said, we are seeing a lot more mobility trips and we hope it is because people are being able to use it more for quality of life and not just essential trips.

Trustee Buchanan stated that she liked the comments that both have made about what are we looking at as we review within the next 6 months. There will be some valuable information there.

Trustee Presley stated that with Connect Mobility, the one thing that will be interesting is being able to tease out the impact of the One-Rate-For-All versus the impact of expanding the service to the City and Town because those both occurred so that when you expand the service area, hopefully we are going to see because we are going to be serving those individuals who didn't have an option before.

Ms. Perry responded that is one thing we will be looking at through our map and highlight those areas and then pool those trips from those areas and compare.

Chairman Whitehouse stated that he didn't know what he was expecting, but when you look at revenues, we are talking less than 5% difference between those numbers. He would have thought that would have been a lot higher. He is taking that as a really positive thing.

Trustee Buchanan stated that we may be preparing for another increase in outbreaks.

Vice-Chairman Hile commented that she might have thought that adding the mobile app in June at the same time as the fares, she sees those things as going together but also conscious of that as being a lot of change. She thinks that we are only seeing early, modest direction, in a very positive direction

and she thanked everybody for the hard work that has come from that. She will be really interested in how all of this continues as we “dance” with the COVID situation.

Chairman Whitehouse commented that before we go into the Interim General Manager’s Report, he thanked Mr. Peterson, the Board, and the staff, for being cooperative in welcoming Mark and thanked the Board for allowing him to ask Mark to fill in as Interim. If you will remember when Martin left, Mark was the guy that he instantly thought of and he called all of the Board Members and asked if they had any concerns. He thanked the City of Bloomington and the Town of Normal for their support of that. He knew it was the right decision and 9 months later he absolutely knows it was the right decision. He thanked Mr. Peterson for coming out of retirement to assist Connect Transit and in keeping this system moving forward.

INTERIM GENERAL MANAGER'S REPORT

Mr. Peterson thanked the Chairman for the kind comments. He stated that he is excited about David coming and stated he is the right person for the job and believes with your help and support and that of the staff, take Connect Transit to new heights. He looks forward to helping in any way he can.

The Chairman asked Mr. Peterson to give a report of the Department of Transportation’s visit to Connect Transit.

Mr. Peterson stated that we had a nice visit with the new Deputy Director of IDOT under mass transit. Her name is Shaun Reese. We had a very good visit and she brought two of her key staff people and spent a good two hours here. We met with staff and gave them a tour of the operation and it was a really nice experience. Mr. Peterson stated that he followed-up with her via email after their visit and she was really impressed with what she saw. They were in Peoria in the morning and then drove to Bloomington Normal. He believes that we have a strong advocate for Connect Transit for IDOT in Shaun Reese.

TRUSTEE'S COMMENTS

All of the Board Members thanked Mr. Peterson for his leadership while Connect Transit was searching for a new General Manager.

At some point during the meeting, the audio from Trustee Foster who was attending virtually, dropped out. She was able to hear the meeting but her audio incoming to the Board disappeared.

ADJOURNMENT

Chairman Whitehouse entertained a Motion to Adjourn, moved by Trustee Buchanan, seconded by Trustee Rao.

Rollcall vote:

AYE: Trustee Buchanan; Vice-Chairman Hile; Trustee McCue; Trustee Presley;
Trustee Rao; Chairman Whitehouse

NAY: None.

Motion carried and the Board meeting adjourned at 5:17 p.m.



Trustee Judy Buchanan, Board Secretary



Jill Baxter, Board Clerk

[SEAL]

