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Rural Transit Day Chat
July 16, 2024

Summary

The nation's sixth #RuralTransitDay Twitter Chat on July 16, 2024 was moderated by Stephanie Lewis of Florida RTAP, Caitlin Musselman from the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC), Kevin Wassom from Michigan Department of Transportation, and John Andoh from Redding Area Bus Authority. Many organizations also posted on other social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

The chat focused on what agencies are doing to recognize passengers and staff on Rural Transit Day and throughout the year, and included a discussion about challenges, solutions, and best practices. There were over 23,758 impressions (many more if you include the Photo Contest "Prequel") from the chat and over 38 individuals and organizations participated.

Participants included the following organizations and individuals:

An aspiring transit planner
Alewife TMA
Burke County Transit
Carpenter Marty Transportation
CARTS Transportation
Center for Transportation and the Environment (CTE)
DJ Transit
Drive Safe Alabama
Florida RTAP
Georgia DOT
Global Network for Popular Transportation
Illinois DOT
Intelligent Healthy Life
International Transportation Learning Center (ITLC)
Johnson County KS Public Transit
A licensed clinician
Michigan DOT
National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC)
National League of Cities
North Central Rural Transit District (Blue Bus)
North County Transit
Ohio Statewide Independent Living Council (OSILC)
Oklahoma Mobility Management
Pennsylvania DOT
Potsdam Museum
Prince George's County DPW&T
Redding Area Bus Authority
Representative Carolyn Logan (NC)
Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC)
RurAL CAP
San Jose State University
Southern Connect South Mississippi
Transaction Associates, Inc.
Transit Happy
Transit Riders (TRU)
Transit Services of Frederick County
Transit Workforce Center (TWC)
Transportation Research Board (TRB)
US Aging
Walk to Success Marketing
Wisconsin Department of Administration
WTS HOT Chapter

Some highlights:

- Several jurisdictions issued Rural Transit Day proclamations.
- Michigan DOT posted some special videos:, including Nelly K., who is legally blind, speaks about the opportunities for travel the Clinton Transit Blue Bus provides.
- NADTC had a Prequel too of fun transit facts.

Many training resources and best practices were shared, and there were also fun moments.

- National RTAP posted a video of some of its team members performing a Rural Transit Day Cheer.
- North Central RTD (the Blue Bus) posted a Rural Transit Day Jump for Joy photo, with people jumping (for joy) with a photo of their bus.
- Musical artist Lofi Melo Mist created a song just for Rural Transit Day.

Visit the chat transcript for questions asked during the chat and attendees' replies. We also have a Rural Transit Day news page with more information about the special day. Answers to chat questions are provided below.

Question 1: What is the one piece of advice you would give to new professionals starting in the rural transit industry?

Answers:

- National RTAP Executive Director Robin Phillips advises to make friends. "The Rural Transit industry is a very friendly place. You can share questions, ideas, and build on successes," she explains. Also, National RTAP shares advice in Spotlight Articles. Review Board Chair Jeremy Bell advises "Learn as much as you can because a fully trained staff will advance your business and help everyone in our community." According to National RTAP's driver training best practices, hands-on training with experienced instructors is a good way to get off to a great start in the industry, like with Nebraska's driver training bootcamp.
- "One helpful piece of advice is to regularly engage with your community of riders and continue to ask questions. By building these relationships we can better serve our community and use their feedback to steer us in the continued development of rural transit," said Ben Terhune, SJSU student.
- Patricia Smith, Georgia DOT Transit Program Manager explains, "It's important to understand FTA compliance requirements & your state guidelines when providing funding to subrecipients. I'd also recommend participating in community outreach to understand public transit needs."

Question 2: How can communities and transit agencies work together to improve rural transit services?

Answers:

- Patricia feels that transit agencies and/or communities could schedule public meetings to identify opportunities to expand and enhance rural transit. And focusing on empathy in planning to ensure mutual respect and understanding is there, added Dr. Mohebbi from Intelligent Healthy Life. "Communities and transit agencies can revolutionize rural transit by integrating innovative technology, pursuing collaborative funding opportunities, and establishing feedback loops to ensure services evolve with community needs," stated Dr. Mohebbi.
- From Ben: They can work together by creating time and space for dialogue about how transit agencies can provide the best services possible, both in-person and online, and continuing to make space for their most vulnerable and marginalized users.

- In FHWA's Rural Virtual Public Involvement Synthesis and Tools, you'll find many new ideas for involving the community.
- NCMM has an eLearning course you'll want to check out: Exploring Types of Agreements to Guide Your Partnerships.
- Gathering community stakeholders to discuss the coordination of services can enhance rural transportation. NADTC created a Coordination Committee Toolkit to assist in maintaining collaboration and more.
- A report posted by Transit Center discusses working with the public to meet their needs and improve rural transit services within communities.
- In some cases, it's literally a matter of just starting a conversation. Matt Crespi's CMI co-founder introduced a community college leader to their local transit leadership by physically moving someone from one room to another at a conference.
- Donna Bailey from Southern Connect South Regional Transportation shared that Mobility Managers that use the Transportation Regional Coordination Group model of hosting bi-monthly meetings opens doors for strong relationships with people from a diverse group of agencies working together to focus on transportation solutions.
- From Global Network for Popular Transportation: It's essential that transit agencies facilitate spaces for communities (including CSOs, neighborhood organizations, associations, etc.) to engage in dialogue and express their needs. Participatory workshops for instance are wonderful to co-create solutions. When engaging with communities, it's key that transit agencies try to gather information on existing transport solutions that are solving mobility needs for users in the absence of regulated public transport services, such as popular transport.

Question 3: Who is the typical rural transit rider? How far do they travel? Why do they travel? How do they find your system to benefit in their life?

Answers:

- From Patricia: The typical rural transit riders face mobility challenges when going to work, doctor's appt, school, grocery, etc. The distance depends on the destination. Transit riders view the systems as being beneficial since it provides assistance to self-sufficiency.
- "Most riders use rural transit for essential services like healthcare and stay within a relatively close range of their communities. Rural transit riders consistently state that their quality of life is dramatically improved by rural transit services," said Ben. "The typical rural transit rider is anyone who is without access to regular transportation. This is most often for socioeconomic reasons, because of a disability, or because the rider is older and no longer able to drive."
- NADTC conducted a Transportation Provider Survey and found that about 97% of the providers served older adults and 90% served persons with disabilities.
- Nebraska Public Transit created a series of videos called Faces of Transit in Nebraska. The video series explores who the agency serves and where they take their passengers.
- Dr. Mohebbi explains that rural transit riders are often older adults or those without vehicles, traveling 10-30 miles for healthcare, shopping, and work. These systems enhance independence and access to essential services.

Question 4: How do rural transit agencies support their community in preparing for emergencies?

Answers:

- If it is a weather-related event, GDOT sends out notifications to receive any updates on impacts to transit service, damage to vehicles/facilities, impacts to transit staff, and provides a list of the federal resources that are available.
- Ben stated that rural transit agencies play a vital role in planning for and responding to emergencies. Some of the ways they do this are by gathering statistics on rural demographics, training employees for emergency response, and directly participating in evacuations.
- "Rural transit agencies prepare for emergencies by training drivers for crisis response, creating emergency routes, and partnering with local organizations to ensure quick mobilization and resource distribution," said Dr. Mohebbi.
- The best way to plan for an emergency is to have safety protocols in place! National RTAP has a training module called START to prepare agencies for just that as well as a disaster planning topic guide.
- The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine knows social media can get the word out. Read their report on Leveraging Social Media Data for Emergency Preparedness and Response.

Question 5: In this current climate of more jobs available than workers, what are your agency's recruiting strategies to fill vacancies in your staff?

Answers:

- Transit Happy tracks recruitment strategies for agencies all over the country. The one thing that seems most successful is job fairs & events, whether you host your own or attend others.
- National RTAP currently has a Transit Manager's Toolkit which provides best practices on hiring and retention. Some strategies recommended are offering competitive wages and benefits, listing new positions across different job sites and social media, and hosting career days.
- The City of Faribault, Minnesota, offered school credit reimbursement to an intern as a means of training and retaining potentially good talent.
- Be flexible. Get some ideas from NHCRP's Telecommuting, Remote Work, and Hybrid Schedules: Managing the Shift to a Flexible Work Future.
- SUMC pointed out that mentor and apprenticeship programs could be a great way to recruit new rural transit staff.
- Here's training on an often overlooked, but hidden talent pool to add to transit agency staff from TWC and NCMM: Creating Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities in the Transportation Workforce.

Question 6: What are some innovative solutions used to address limited transit options in rural areas?

Answers:

- From Matt: It's important to remember that the challenge of "limited options" isn't just about destinations and schedules, but also includes issues like affordability, safety, and a variety of accessibility needs (car seats for kids are another one!). Matt also thinks that safety improvements like HEPA filters and ventilation are going to be important going forward. It's an exciting time in transit innovation. Dynamic routing and/or smartphones promise to take demand response services to the next level, and micromobility/last mile solutions are more abundant and manageable than ever before.

- Ride programs partnering with Lyft and Uber for flexible, subsidized, and ADA accessible rides are expanding in rural communities. Another great solution is expanding ride share infrastructure and resources in rural communities, shared Ben.
- Up until just a couple years ago, Meigs County in southeast Ohio didn't offer public transportation. Now, it's building a transportation hub.
- AARP shares examples of Fare-Free and Low-Cost 'Age-Friendly' Transportation Options.
- Here's a unique idea from the National Center for Sustainable Transportation, UC Davis: All Aboard! Easier Transit Travel with Standardized Payments.
- NADTC developed an Innovations Showcase, which highlights services like the Quaboag Connector in Ware, MA that was implemented to connect underserved rural residents to vital community services.
- TCRP's Provision of Alternative Services by Transit Agencies highlights services that meet more spontaneous travel needs of ADA paratransit riders based on cost per subsidized trip.
- Park and rides can help get people to work. Bike racks on buses help with first mile last mile access. Make it easier for people to access alternative modes including walking and biking, explained Robin.
- From Dr. Mohebbi: Innovative rural transit solutions include autonomous shuttles, telehealth transport services, mobile app-based scheduling, and using drones for critical deliveries.
- Tori Robertson, SSJU student, added that some rural agencies have adopted fare-free transit as a solution.
- In 2020, GDOT completed a Statewide Transit Plan (SWTRP) to coordinate with local governments, planning agencies, and transit providers on the transit needs across the state.
- Some of the most innovative solutions the Global Network for Popular Transportation has seen use smaller vehicles like two and three wheelers as taxis, trucks or pick-up trucks to carry passengers, and even boats!

Question 7: What mobility solutions have you implemented at your agency that are non-traditional beyond typical dial-a-ride and flex or fixed route solutions?

Answers:

- Georgia DOT developed a Let's Ride App that was launched on Rural Transit Day in 2021. This app allows transit users to easily plan their trips with rural transit providers. They're focused on increasing the number of customers that use it on a regular basis.
- TRB's Transit IDEA's Innovative Operating Strategy for Paratransit Services discusses ways to reduce empty miles driven by paratransit operators by serving trips of cross-zonal customers.
- Agencies are adopting innovative solutions like electric ferries, drone deliveries for remote areas, & app-based coordination for shared rides & community-driven transport services, similar to rural initiatives in some Scandinavian countries, explained Dr. Mohebbi.
- Shared-Use Mobility Center's (SUMC) A Guidebook for Mobility Innovation: Principles to Plan, Design, & Implement Innovative Mobility Projects will give you lots of ideas.
- Caitlyn explained that volunteer driver programs are an easy way to provide rides in areas with limited transportation options. Volunteers typically drive their own personal vehicle and develop a personal relationship with their riders.
- The APTA Mobility Innovation Hub has several examples of non-traditional solutions, such as microtransit.

- The city of Montería in Colombia introduced three wheelers as feeders to their transit system. They've employed women as drivers and users get a discount if they use the three wheelers to get to the bus station.

Question 8: What's your favorite rural transit destination?

Answers:

- National RTAP aired a Rural Transit Day "Prequel" with photos from our 2023 "This is Rural Transit" Photo Contest. All of which are wonderful destinations.
- Patricia answered, "I love being near the water, therefore, any of the transit agencies with locations near water are my favorites."
- Matt likes cute towns in Western Massachusetts.
- Ben's favorite rural transit destination is the movies! Most rural communities have movie theaters, they are ADA accessible, and their schedules are easy to plan around. Going to the movies is a great way to get outside and have something to look forward to.
- Dr. Mohebbi enjoys exploring the scenic routes of Vermont's Green Mountains is my favorite rural transit destination, offering stunning views and charming small towns.
- Stephanie suggested Port Saint Joe. Beautiful sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico with a charming small town.
- Tori likes traveling to the California Poppy Reserve in Antelope Valley, CA.
- Robin used the Gorge service Portland to the Dalles to go on a bike ride with a friend. Other people were going for a day out without driving or hiking on the Pacific Crest Trail.

Question 9: How is your agency dealing with extended delivery times for new transit vehicles and quality issues once they do arrive?

Answers:

- From Ben: Some ideas have been to better optimize cargo space, reduce regulations that slow the arrival of new vehicles, and increase domestic production. Fortunately, many of these issues are being addressed by Executive Order 14123.
- MIT has some thought-provoking ideas for Reshaping of Supply Chain Crisis Management, such as just-in-time/lean manufacturing.

Question 10: Tell us about your transit heroes.

Answers:

- From Patricia: Transit heroes look for opportunities to celebrate the staff and passengers by giving them tools needed to be successful. They see the work of public transit as a way to give back.
- Matt's transit heroes right now are the people still wearing masks on vehicles to make it safe for the disabled/older/high risk folks who need transit the most.
- Sedona Shuttle driver Dave Rehborg came to the rescue of an 80-year-old hiker from the United Kingdom who had been lost for about five hours.
- Ben's transit heroes are the drivers and dispatchers who dedicate their careers to ensuring people in rural communities can have safe and reliable transportation. Their commitment to building

these networks and relationships is heroic and often goes unnoticed. Tori added, "Let your rural transit heroes know you appreciate them whenever you can, you could make their day!"

Question 11: We're awarding a Rural Transit Day t-shirt to the post that answers this question with the most likes by 8:00 AM ET on July 17, 2024 - How is your organization celebrating Rural Transit Day this year?

Answers:

- Jaime McKay of Transit Services of Frederick County posted about her team onboard their buses to thank their riders for riding and our dedicated operators for showing up every day for their rural residents. This post won our contest!
- National RTAP received a letter from the White House about Rural Transit Day. National RTAP is also filling up a Rural Transit Day time capsule. We got tokens from Brainerd & Crow Wing Transit, HIRTA, Lake Havasu City Transit, Morr Trans, People's Transit, Sauk Center Bus, St. Lawrence County Transit, TriCAP Central MN, True Transit & more.
- DJ Transit, Inc coordinated the 4th Annual "We Love Our Seniors Parade" in Laurel, MS in honor of Rural Transit Day.
- SSJU Resource Library summer students had fun celebrating Rural Transit Day. Ben celebrated Rural Transit Day by riding the bus and promoting public and rural transit resources in my own communities. Tori celebrated by being in this chat and seeing all the amazing resources and answers, while connecting with everyone!
- Georgia DOT recognized Georgia's rural transit providers on Tuesday, July 16, 2024, in honor of Rural Transit Day.
- Door County Connect and Door 2 Door Rides in Wisconsin, Victor Valley Transit in California, and CARTS in Texas offered free rides on Rural Transit Day.
- Matt suggested transit themed cocktails. Like a MARTA-ini or a SLO Transit Gin Fizz or...uh...a Sidecar?
- Benzie Bus hosted a free community event to celebrate Rural Transit Day. It took place in the parking lot of the Mills Community house. Attendees enjoyed feeding alpacas, touching a first responder truck, lawn games, touring the Trolley, and more!
- Mountain Rides, a rural service in CO added as a new stop in the "spirit of Rural Transit Day."
- Maury County, TN Mayor Sheila Butt and Lincoln County, TN Mayor Bill Newman signed a Proclamation for SCATS Transportation declaring July 16 as Rural Transit Day. Fares were free on July 16 for SCATS Transportation & Mule Town Trolley.
- Claiborne Public Transit in Mississippi hosted a Rural Transit Day Hero Festival, with games, food & music.
- The Boulder County Colorado Mobility and Access Coalition (MAC) Agenda and Newsletter had a special article about Rural Transit Day and the pledge.
- California and Caltrans celebrated Rural Transit Day with a special webpage and infographic.
- The Georgia County Board of Commissioners proclaimed Rural Transit Day.