

## Community Rides Report

### Executive Summary

Improving transportation information and trip planning capacity to increase awareness of existing transit services and improve the ease-of-use for riders. Our project was comprised of a few key components aimed at meeting the goal of *Improving transportation information and trip planning capacity to increase awareness of existing transit services and improve the ease-of-use for riders*. The first component of our project was an extensive outreach campaign in the form of focus groups, community events, and rider surveys. These outreach initiatives were intended to provide our project with key insights about what the priorities of our community were and to guide our efforts.

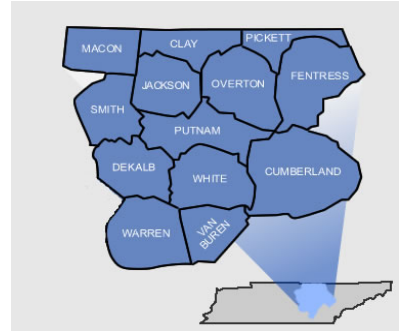
A second key component of our project involved using the insights generated from our outreach to revamp our marketing materials and approach. The outreach initiatives were very helpful in guiding our marketing efforts. We quickly realized that current and prospective riders did not really care about whether the service they were using was demand response or micro-transit. It was at that point that we coalesced around what we refer to as our “One Message” campaign. This campaign was targeted around the slogan “We’ll get you to where you need to go.” We used some of the Community Rides funds to put up billboards, play radio ads, social media, and other forms of marketing to much success.

The final component of our project involved converting our deviated fixed routes to the General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS). While we had originally planned to undertake this task ourselves, we ultimately brought on board Passio Technologies to convert our deviated fixed routes to GTFS. We now have a dedicated white-label mobile phone application for our riders that can use to track their routes, build a schedule with reminders, and track their bus in real time. We have been working with Google and our routes should be live in Google Maps by the end of February 2023.



## Our Project's Story

The Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency's Transportation Department has been providing public transportation for 45 years. We operate in a fourteen-county service area in what is referred to as the Upper Cumberland. Putnam County is the largest county per capita and is a 75-mile drive from Nashville. Our service area spans from the top of the Tennessee/Kentucky border with Macon, Clay, and Pickett counties to Cumberland, Van Buren, and Warren counties on the southern border of our service area.



We offer a variety of transportation services throughout the Upper Cumberland. We offer demand response transportation in all fourteen counties within our service area. We also provide deviated fixed routes in three counties, a micro-transit service in two of our more populous counties, and an intercity feeder service out of two counties to the urban areas of Nashville and Murfreesboro five days a week.

## The Problem

The problem that our project was attempting to solve involved the perceived lack of awareness within our large service area as to the services we offer and who those services are offered to. The project was meant to listen and learn from our current riders but also to identify new ways to make inroads and onboard new riders that may not have used our service. We consistently hear that folks in our communities are not aware of that fact that our services exist. If they do know about us, we often hear that community members thought are services were exclusively for the elderly or for medical appointments. A large focus of this project was to dispel those notions and make clear that "we will get you to where you need to go" and that "anyone can ride."

Another related problem was that information regarding our current transportation services were not as robust, easy to use, and readily available as we would have preferred. The real time tracking of our deviated fixed routes with Passio GO and incorporation into Google Maps was a task that was meant to assist with this problem.

Marketing was the final piece of the puzzle to assist with all the previously mentioned problems. By engaging in heavy community outreach about what the transportation wants, needs, and wishes were in the community, we were able to more effectively target our marketing approach to assist with reducing the impact of each of the problems mentioned.

Our original project goals did not change throughout our project. We did alter our approach along the way to make the most of the funding available to us. Our original intention as outlined in the grant application was to hire marketing consultants to assist us in rebranding and revamping our marketing materials. Once we got going with the project, we realized we had staff at our system agency to assist with some of the marketing rebrand. It was at that time that we pivoted from the idea of spending money on a marketing consultant to simply spending the funding that was allocated to that expense to direct marketing expenses.

## **Project Partners**

We worked closely with two partners throughout our Community Rides project. The first project partner was Tennessee Tech University (TTU) which is in Cookeville, Tennessee. We work with TTU on a variety of projects and services but Community Rides helped formalize our working relationship with the University to a much greater extent. We worked with the business school within TTU and a group of graduating seniors to convert our routes to GTFS. The student group helped us with the data collection on the front-end to convert our routes to GTFS. The experience was useful for us and was also a useful experience for the soon-to-be graduating seniors as they begin to embark on their career journeys.

The other project partner was the Cookeville Regional Charitable Foundation (CRCF). The CRCF is a charitable organization that exists within the Cookeville Regional Medical Center and aims to offer charitable aid to Upper Cumberland residents. The original intent of this partnership was to formalize an ongoing working relationship to identify ways we could assist with transportation needs of the CRCF's diverse clients. The CRCF was a project sponsor for several of our community events. Through our partnership brought about by Community Rides, we now have working arrangements for micro-transit and demand response service to CRCF clients.

## **Scope of Project**

The target audience for our project was the entire population of the Upper Cumberland. As mentioned, many members of our communities seem to have the misconception that our transportation services are solely for the elderly or for medical appointments. A major component of this project was to identify ways to dispel those misconceptions and onboard community members who would otherwise benefit from the services we offer. Our "One Message" campaign was a major part of this effort. We are looking to start a new messaging campaign with the slogan that "Anyone can ride" as well.

## **Resources**

Technology and outside funding are a couple of the resources resource that we intend to rely on to meet the projects high level goal of *Improving transportation information and trip planning capacity to increase awareness of existing transit services and improve the ease-of-use for riders*. We used our 5311 and CARES Act funding to procure an information technology system for all vehicles that service our deviated fixed routes. We procured a standalone white label web and mobile application for our riders to track their bus in real time. The idea was that a rider who goes to the grocery store no longer needs to wait outside in the cold or the heat of summer so that they do not miss their bus on the return trip. They can simply track their bus in real time and walk out when it nears the pickup location. We also secured state capital grant funding to install bus shelters at every stop along our routes. We are currently in the process of adding more signage and finishing the installs. Integration of deviated fixed route information is scheduled to go live on Google Maps sometime in February 2023.

The State of Tennessee has been a great partner with administration of FTA funds as well as through their own state funded grants. Our project manager at National RTAP, Liz Taylor, was also extremely helpful along the way and provided us flexibility throughout the project. We did follow the project timeline and the phases outlined therein. As mentioned, we did pivot in subtle

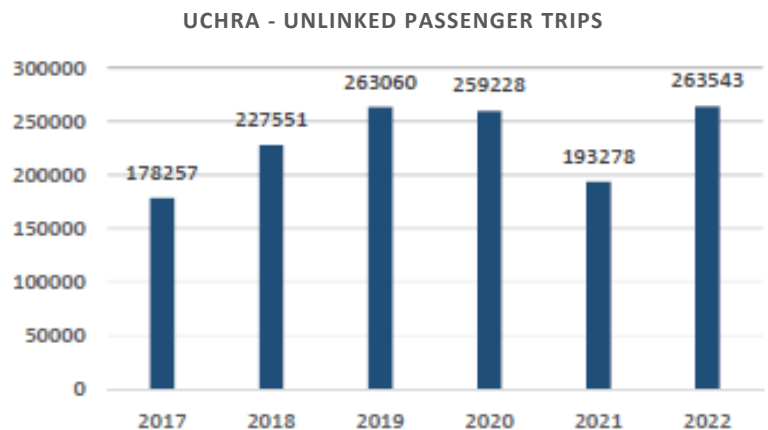
ways on things such as not relying on a marketing consultant and instead using our own in-house staff at the Upper Cumberland Development District. No major deviations on project scope or goals were undertaken after we were awarded the grant funding.

### Outcomes, Impact, and Performance Measures

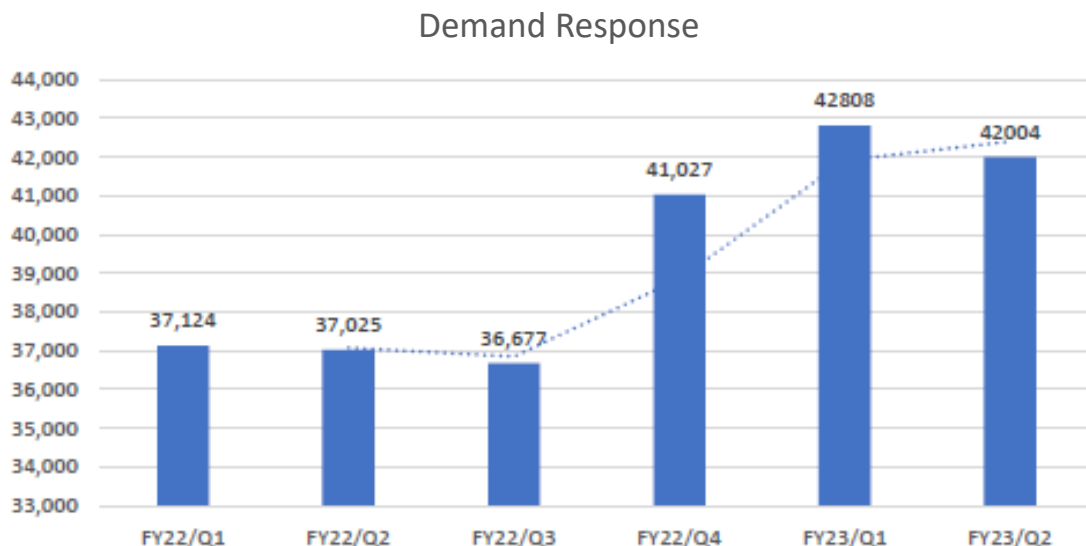
Being that our project coincided with the re-opening of our community as the worst of COVID-19 receded, it is difficult to correlate with 100% accuracy the extent in which our marketing efforts and technology investments have contributed to the increase in ridership we have seen. To what extent would we have seen an increase in ridership regardless of whether or not we made strategic investments in marketing and technology? It is difficult to say.

We can with 100% certainty report that the marketing efforts and technology investments we have made have made a positive impact on our ridership and the communities we serve. As you can

see in the table to the right, our trip numbers for the fiscal year ending June 2022 are essentially back to where they were pre-pandemic. **However**, our trip numbers are up **20%** across all service categories when you compare the first half of FFY22 with the first half of FFY23.

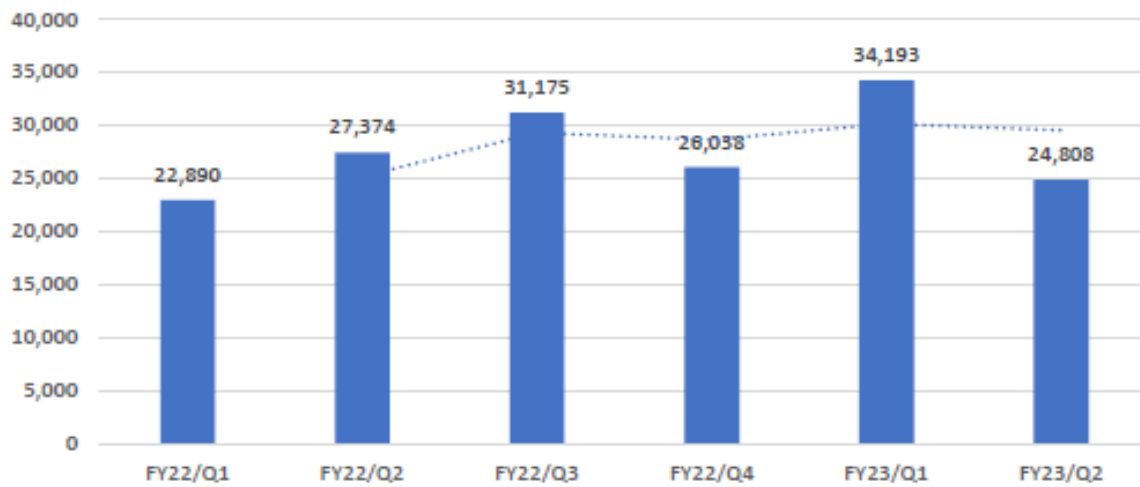


Comparing **1H/FY22 and 1H/FY23**, our Demand Response Trips were up **14%**



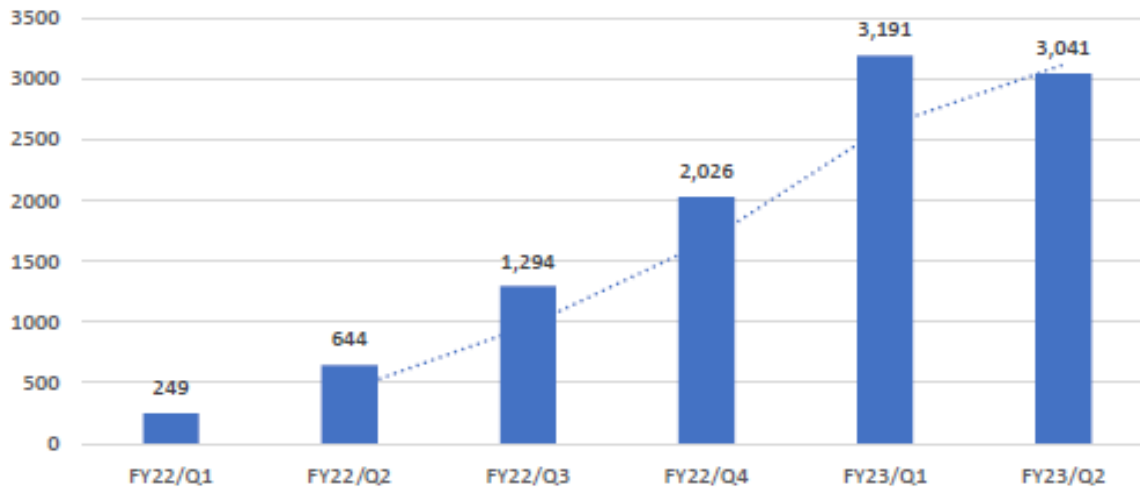
Comparing **1H/FY22** and **1H/FY23**, our Deviated Fixed Route Trips were up **17%**

Deviated Fixed Routes



Comparing **1H/FY22** and **1H/FY23**, our Micro-transit Trips were up **598%**

Microtransit Trips

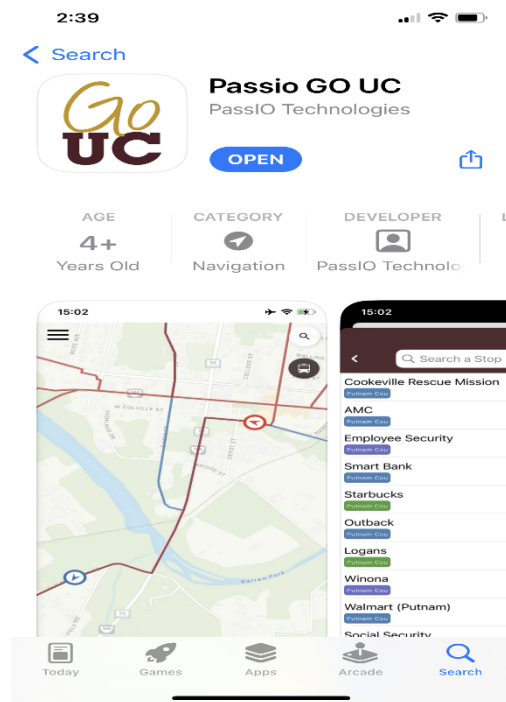


## Information Technology Investments

Investments in Information Technology were an important consideration for us as we took on the task of *Improving transportation information and trip planning capacity to increase awareness of existing transit services and improve the ease-of-use for our riders.* We were originally thinking that we would convert our fixed routes to the general transit feed specification ourselves, but quickly realized we needed more than just Google/Apple maps integration. It was at that time that we worked with our State Department of Transportation to procure a modern information technology system with Passio Technologies.

We now have automatic passenger counters, real time computer aided dispatch and automatic vehicle location detection and tracking, a web-based and passenger facing mobile phone application that riders can use to track their bus, their route, or a specific stop. Riders can subscribe for updates in real-time to be notified when their bus is close or if there are any service interruptions for inclement weather or other unforeseen issues.

The mobile phone application is called Passio GO, but we elected to pay extra for our own white label application called Passio GO UC. With Passio GO UC, riders can see real time bus locations, schedules, and ETA's.



# Follow Your Bus

With the GO UC app!

**No more missing the Bus!**  
**With real-time tracking and notifications, riding the bus has never been easier!**



Download the GO UC app from the Google Play or Apple App Store today, take the in-app tour and enjoy!



## Marketing Materials





# PICK UP

UPPER CUMBERLAND

# Uber

## NEED A RIDE IN CROSSVILLE?

## FIND US ON THE UBER APP



SCAN AND FIND US ON THE UBER APP!

## UC★HRA

Public Transportation

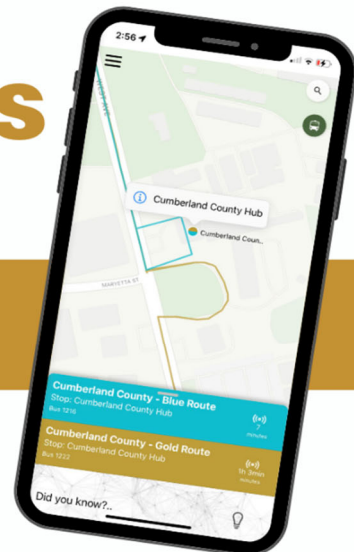
## WE GET YOU WHERE YOU NEED TO GO!

833 UC-TRIPS | [ucpublictransit.com](http://ucpublictransit.com)

This project is funded under an agreement with the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

# Follow Your Bus with the *Go* UC app!

No more missing the bus! With real-time tracking and notifications, riding the bus has never been easier!



Download the GO UC app from the Google Play or Apple App Store today, take the in-app tour and enjoy!  
[www.uchra.passiogo.com/](http://www.uchra.passiogo.com/)






### HOW TO RIDE WITH PICK UP UPPER CUMBERLAND



Travel within the Cookeville and Crossville areas with Pick Up and enjoy a personalized riding experience. Our fleet is equipped with everything to make your ride comfortable including phone chargers and waters.

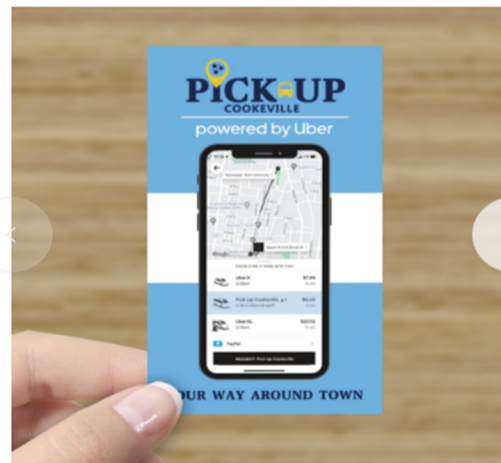
**HOW IT WORKS**

- Scan the QR code below with your smartphone camera
- Create your Uber Account
- Ready to schedule a trip? Simply enter your pick up and drop off address at the top of the screen.
- Select Pick Up UC on the ride option screen.
- Request your ride.



GET THE APP


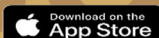
This service is provided by UCHRA Public Transportation. Project funded under an agreement with the Tennessee Department of Transportation.





## FOLLOW YOUR BUS WITH THE *Go* **UC** APP

### Get real-time tracking & notifications

## GET IT NOW:





This project funded under an agreement with the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

# WE GET YOU WHERE YOU NEED TO GO

# 1-833 UC TRIPS



ucpublictransit.com

Projects funded under an agreement with the Tennessee Department of Transportation.



## Testimonials

UCHRA Public Transit has worked directly with individuals at a local coffee shop, *The Exceptional Bean*. The Exceptional Bean solely employs individuals with disabilities. Our transit department connected these individuals with our Job Access program and all the transportation services we offer. We provided travel training for one of their employees that has grown into a wonderful relationship. Leigh Anna Mann uses UC Public transit almost daily to get to and from her job at Exceptional Bean. She also uses our transportation services to go to the YMCA and community events and services.



We identified her need for travel training, enrolled her in job access, connected her with rental assistance, the low-income heating and energy assistance program and the low-income household water assistance program. She is now living independently for the first time in her 30+ years. Gaining valuable knowledge about how to access the transit services available to her helped provide her with the resources to change her life.

We held countless community engagement events such as a veteran's roundtable, a workforce development roundtable, Hispanic outreach events, events with the international student's dormitory at TTU, and countless others. We learned unique insights from each of these constituencies and shared with each of them the services we offer.



## Accomplishments, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

We're most proud of the impact that these investments have had in the lives of our riders. The impact is easy to see when you ride around in one of our vehicles on any given day and see the young adult being picked up by one of our micro transit vehicles to go to work, or the struggling single mother who gets free transportation to and from work under our Job Access program, or the elderly individual who just needs a ride to the senior center or grocery store. With gas prices high and cars more expensive than ever, we are proud of the impact that we have had and will continue to have on the lives of our riders who rely on public transportation. Transportation access is an important contributor to the social determinants of health. Through the Community Rides grant and our other federal and state grants, we have made and will continue to make strategic investments to better serve our riders.

The biggest challenge we faced was early on in our project during the community outreach and engagement phase. We quickly realized that folks were not willing to give up their time to talk to us, fill out surveys, engage in focus groups, and other forms of outreach unless we had some kind of "carrot on a string." We had numerous community engagement events which had relatively low costs and high return on investment. We used food and gift cards to entice community members to participate. We typically are not able to use our federal or state grants to pay for things like food, gift cards, and catering, but Community Rides provided us the flexibility to use those methods to increase engagement.

We worked hard to find low-cost ways to engage the public and generate useful insights about ways we could improve service on behalf of our current and future riders.



## **Project Sustainability**

From the outset, we did not want to ramp up service or marketing spend without a plan to ensure the new service or marketing would be able to continue once the Community Rides grant concluded. It was for this reason that we elected to not pursue service expansion as part of our original grant proposal. After all, we already offered a variety of transportation services and our thinking was that we should put resources into increasing awareness and ease-of-access to the transportation services we already offered. To that extent, we have learned a lot about what marketing strategies provide the strongest return-on-investment over the past 15 months with Community Rides. Before community rides, our annual marketing spend was \$0. We now realize the benefit marketing plays in our service and are planning to budget \$50,000 each year for marketing expenses moving forward. We realize this is a relatively large amount of funding but we think its important to continue to break down perceived barriers in our large rural community about who can rides and how they can ride. We are working on our next campaign now that revolves around the message that, "Anyone can ride."

Many of the activities that we undertook within the scope of our Community Rides grant were either things that we had been wanting to do or should have been doing all along. To that extent, we're looking to keep the momentum going and work towards continuing to identify smart ways to better serve our riders. Community outreach as a means to inform our decision-making process is something we are looking to continue doing. Before Community Rides, we did not participate in our own internal annual, recurring Community Needs Assessments. Moving forward, we are planning to incorporate a number of questions related to rider satisfaction as well as other unique questions each year depending on the insights, we're looking to acquire in the annual UCHRA Community Needs Assessment.

The Community Rides grant was an invaluable resource to our department and the communities we serve. The grant guidelines themselves helped us structure our thinking in ways that we were not used to and we are grateful for the opportunity.