



## Accessibility Advisory Committee

### **Meeting Minutes: February 18, 2020**

#### **Attendees**

Present: Paul Semelfort (Chair), Denise Rush (Vice-Chair), Darnise Bush, Vanessa Coles, Charlie Crawford, Phillippa Mezile, Patrick Sheehan, and Phil Posner (Remote Participation).

#### **Call to Order**

Chair Semelfort called the MetroAccess Subcommittee meeting to order at 4:00pm.

Chair Semelfort started with introductions of the Committee members and staff.

#### **Review of Agenda & Minutes from Prior Meeting**

The Meeting Agenda was approved.

The January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, Meeting Minutes were approved as written.

#### **Customer Service & Outreach Reports**

##### *Customer Service Report:*

Kate Bart, Office of Quality Assurance, MTM, stated the follow-up has been performed with all the customers who provided their concerns, and the issues have been resolved.

##### *Outreach Report:*

David Shaffer, Ombudsman, Office of ADA Policy and Planning, stated he went to the National Federation of the Blind Washington seminar to recruit college interns and employees with disabilities. The attendance was good, and several resumes were received. Mr. Shaffer asked the Committee for references as well.

Christiaan Blake, Managing Director, Access Services, shared information about the first of many of the Abilities-Ride showcases, held on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020. As part of his outreach effort, Mr. Blake also went to a community association to talk about MetroAccess and Abilities-Ride that included the various aspects of our services, the changes that are coming, and the changes that have been implemented in regard to Abilities-Ride options. In the next couple of weeks, Mr. Blake will be going to the Fairfax Transportation Committee to talk about MetroAccess and Abilities-Ride.

#### **Michael Wilson Award and Rush Award**

##### *Michael Wilson Award:*

Conrad Marshall, Project Manager, TransDev, introduced Ms. Godfrey, an employee since 2013, and one of the top operators. Ms. Godfrey has a great attitude and loves to help her customers. She follows a few mantras: be kind, stop being angry, being pleasant keeps you healthy, and saying "every day is a super fantastic day" immediately makes you feel better. Ms. Godfrey thanked everyone for the award.

Ms. Rush stated many people may not know the background of the Michael Wilson Award. Allison Anderson, Operations Manager, MetroAccess, stated it is an honor for her to share the background of the Michael Wilson Award. Mr. Wilson worked for MV Transit and had the utmost respect as an operator. The Committee decided to commemorate his spirit by naming this recognition after his passing due to illness.

*Rush Award:*

The Rush Award was presented to James Elliot. Chair Semelfort read a brief bio for Mr. Elliot. Mr. Elliot has been working with MetroAccess since 1997, and prior to that he worked with the Federal Government, also as a driver. Mr. Elliot has exhibited outstanding customer service, professionalism, excellent driving habits and communication skills during his tenure with Transdev since 2013. He continually displayed exceptional customer service and commitment to excellence. He is a model employee. Ms. Rush thanked Mr. Elliot for his exceptional service and wished him well post retirement. Mr. Marshall also honored Mr. Elliott with an award for his successful tenure.

**WMATA Budget:**

Chair Semelfort provided information about the three scheduled budget hearings and asked about shuttle service arrangements from New Carrollton to the public hearing location. Carol Peredo Lopez, Director, Office of ADA Policy and Planning, confirmed accessible shuttles will be provided from New Carrollton to the public hearing location. Dr. Posner asked about Abilities-Ride for public hearings. Mr. Blake stated we will look at the number of people booking trips for the hearings, and then they would be provided with options.

Ms. Bush asked about various modes of providing comments for the public hearings. Ms. Peredo Lopez stated people can submit their comments via online survey and/or mail their comments to WMATA Headquarters. All comments must be received by 5:00 p.m. on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020.

Ms. Coles asked about options for Abilities-Ride. Mr. Blake informed the customers would have to make reservations with MetroAccess first, afterwards they will be contacted by staff with information about options on Abilities-Ride. Ms. Coles asked about the budget document being accessible. Mr. Blake stated Mr. Shaffer has been working on having it formatted in an accessible format with the reader. As an alternative, Mr. Blake is also reviewing a third-party resource to make this happen within a faster timeline. If that changes, he is also considering an audio book type of format for this budget document. The summary and the basic conversions had been provided in an accessible format. The accessible challenges of people with low vision or blind people are being worked on.

Ms. Rush stated people with low vision or who are blind, have always had to listen to someone else for information. This time, a blind person has challenged the accessibility of the budget document and it is a shame that we do not have it available for us to read. Mr. Blake stated he has brought many features of accessibility including accessible documents, to the region and is constantly working on improvements, as he is currently working on the accessible budget document.

Ms. Rush commented about not being able to hear the meetings in past. Mr. Blake stated meetings are a separate issue than accessible documents. The process of hearing the meetings has changed from prior and currently, AAC uses the system that WMATA Board uses for meeting audios. Mr. Shaffer stated the recorded meetings are accessible only using the Internet Explorer.

A customer stated his concern about the different time-frames listed in the budget brochure versus the docket for MetroAccess service to sustain in case of bus service cuts. Mr. Blake stated if a bus route is cut, per the law it will automatically change the service for MetroAccess. The Department of Access Service has asked the Board to strongly consider not to change MetroAccess service at-least until December 2020, if bus routes change. On December 31, 2020, if we find we are not ready to change the MetroAccess service area based on various reasons, he would recommend the extension for rest of the fiscal year. Mr. Blake recommended that the Committee to advocate for no bus route changes in order to sustain the current level of MetroAccess service.

A second customer stated his concerns about the Budget documents not being accessible, information suppression, the tone of the General Manager's message, and the AAC's discussion of fare evasion rather than focusing on accessibility issues.

Mr. Crawford stated if bus service cuts happen, then MetroAccess service should remain the same for the entire fiscal year. Mr. Blake recommended that the Committee advocate for no bus service changes in order to keep the same MetroAccess service.

Mr. Sheehan inquired about studies of bus routes to determine impact on MetroAccess service. Mr. Blake explained we did our study internally to examine the impact. Instead of taking a chance, he would rather protect the service area and not have those customers impacted by either not getting the bus routes cut or set up MetroAccess in a way that is sustainable even if it is beyond the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile. A customer stated the federal statute requires paratransit service within the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile, however, it does not limit the service beyond the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile of the fixed route.

Vice-Chair Rush stated the budget is for a year so why the MetroAccess service to retain as currently, for only six months? Mr. Blake stated he is trying to find options for customers, and at that time we will see if there is a need for making changes. If needed, he would ask for an extension. Based on his anticipation on his work product, he has gone against the grain to ensure it is a win for all.

#### **Abilities-Ride Update and Q&A from AAC Members:**

Chair Semelfort asked for an update on Abilities-Ride. Mr. Blake stated the list of all the providers was shared with the Committee. He is working on a new promotion and each company has its way of communicating the promotion. We are sharing information via the showcases and other outreach efforts. We are offering customers options to use Abilities-Ride for one trip, with one particular company. For the companies that are application (app) based, customers will receive an electronic voucher for free rides. For the phone-based companies, there will be a particular location for which the trips will be free. Mr.

Blake will review the companies for promotion purposes, to distribute the rides and review customer comfort. He is booking the promotion trips for customers who are interested in trying the program. Eventually, customers will have the ability to book their own trips. The promotion will be at least until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

Chair Semelfort asked about the next showcases and shared his experience of using the app for Via. As a regular customer, he was not able to get a ride. Mr. Blake stated as a consumer, that would be his choice to whether book or not book with Via. Mr. Blake also stated the showcase in Prince George's would be the last one as it would be the most important one, and to ensure ample number of providers are available. The next showcase may be in Virginia. Chair Semelfort asked about the hidden fees, the wait time, etc. Mr. Blake stated there is no special discount for WMATA or MetroAccess customers, it is the regular service.

Mr. Sheehan asked for clarification about the promotion. Mr. Blake informed one destination is free whether the customer goes there once or multiple times during a week. Any trip to and from that particular address would be free.

Chair Semelfort asked about the company in Virginia. Mr. Blake clarified that the company in Virginia – Old Dominion, is are phone based, however, they have an app just like Regency and Silver. Uber and Via are the two companies that are app based, only.

A customer asked about the timeline for the promotion and asked when Metro or MetroAccess tries to change the paradigm, customers get enticed to use something, what would happen later. Mr. Blake stated the first promotion lasted for 30 days. People knew about the end of it at the time it began. For the time-being, if a customer is in Maryland, they can continue to call Regency and Silver cabs. Their previous promotion has ended, and they are now part of the new promotion. Customers who use the current promotion, can use either one of the two companies or use MetroAccess for any other trips. After the promotion ends and the service is open for customers to self-book, they will continue to pay \$5.00 and Metro will pay \$15.00. There have been Committee discussions about free public transit. In a way, MetroAccess customers are getting exactly that, free transportation, and a few people present in the meeting testified to that. There have been discussions about flat fares for MetroAccess. If that becomes a reality, then perhaps the fare may change to a nominal fee. Mr. Blake stated for the first promotion, Metro paid up to \$20.00. For the current promotion trips, Metro can pay an unlimited amount of money. The choice trips will have regular Abilities-Ride trips where customer pays the first \$5.00 and Metro pays \$15.00.

#### **Enhanced Mobility Grant's Awarded for MA Related Projects:**

Mr. Blake stated we were awarded grants from the Council of Governments (COG) and received \$1 million for MetroAccess vehicles. This grant helps to design a van that everybody likes. In March we will have another presentation of the van. The preference is to have a low-floor with ramp, providing ease of boarding and exiting the vehicle, higher ceilings, enough room for 2 wheelchairs and 2 ambulatory persons. We will get the feedback of the Committee, as we did with the sedans. We are going to use our inhouse

resources to procure the vans. Mr. Blake shared information about the second grant received. With all the providers in the pool, it may become complex for consumers and will require a lot of outreach. An intern will be hired for outreach and general advocacy for Abilities-Ride and its providers.

Chair Semelfort asked about an app like the one in New York, that provides customers real time information. Mr. Blake stated the global positioning system (GPS) will be on your app, however, without a good GPS the app would not be worth much. Therefore, first we need to work on a good GPS.

**Policy and Procedure – Safety Issue:**

Due to time constraints, the topic was moved to next month's meeting.

**Public Comment:**

A customer stated her concern about an appointment-time trip that was booked four hours in advance and was dropped off three hours prior to her appointment time. Mr. Blake provided recommendations for her trip reservations and stated that trip would have been reviewed.

A customer commended her trip via Uber, as the ride was on-time. She also commended a MetroAccess trip where she was not added on to the driver's manifest and the trip was timely. The customer stated if there have been changes on MetroAccess, it is for the improvement. She also mentioned about a canceled trip where the ride showed up.

Vice-Chair Rush provided information about her trip that was delayed on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. She had to contact Mr. Blake and he made sure she got a ride for her to reach her destination in a timely manner. Vice-Chair Rush asked about the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs). Mr. Blake stated he will get the number and that he is encouraging the providers to partner with other providers to get as many WAVs as possible. Vice-Chair Rush asked about MV Transportation being used as one of the partners and asked whether it is conflict of interest as the company is contracted with MetroAccess for another purpose. Mr. Blake stated MV Transportation is being used by Uber as one of their partners and that is one of the reasons why he is monitoring the service, it is also to ensure that there is no conflict of interest and the service runs as it should.

Ms. Bush stated some of the cab drivers complain that they do not get paid for the wait-time. Mr. Blake stated the drivers have choices. However, if customers choose their vehicles rather than other options, that improves business for them.

Ms. Coles recommended a sleeve for the seat belts for sanitization purposes. Mr. Blake thanked her for the recommendation and asked her to bring it up at the next month's meeting as well.

**Meeting adjourned at 6:00pm.**