

December 5, 2023



Dial-A-Ride Expansion Study

Columbus City Council Briefing

Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates, Inc.



Additional $\frac{3}{4}$ Mile Premium Service – 1.5 Miles Total

$\frac{3}{4}$ Mile ADA Paratransit (Required)

METRA Fixed Bus Routes

Today's Presentation

- 1 Study Overview
- 2 ADA and Demand-Response Services
- 3 METRA's Dial-A-Ride Service
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Study Overview

Study Context

- METRA operates Dial-A-Ride complementary paratransit service for eligible riders whose disability prevents them traveling to/from METRA's fixed-route bus service or from riding the bus, a requirement of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- The ADA requires that METRA provide "origin-to-destination" service between locations within **0.75 miles of METRA bus routes**.
- On August 8, 2023, a Dial-A-Ride rider appeared before the council to have METRA serve an address located outside the current Dial-A-Ride service area.
- Following deliberations, the council voted to expand the Dial-A-Ride service area to 1.5 miles of fixed-route bus routes, **which exceeds the ADA requirements**.
- Following the council vote, the City of Columbus engaged Nelson\Nygaard to evaluate the demand for and costs of providing expanded Dial-A-Ride service.

Study Scope

- Evaluate current Dial-A-Ride service
 - Includes assessment of capacity to meet ADA requirements
- Seek public input on where additional service is needed
- Estimate demand and costs for service area expansion
- Recommend ways to deliver expanded or “premium” service and continue to comply with the ADA requirements for Dial-A-Ride service



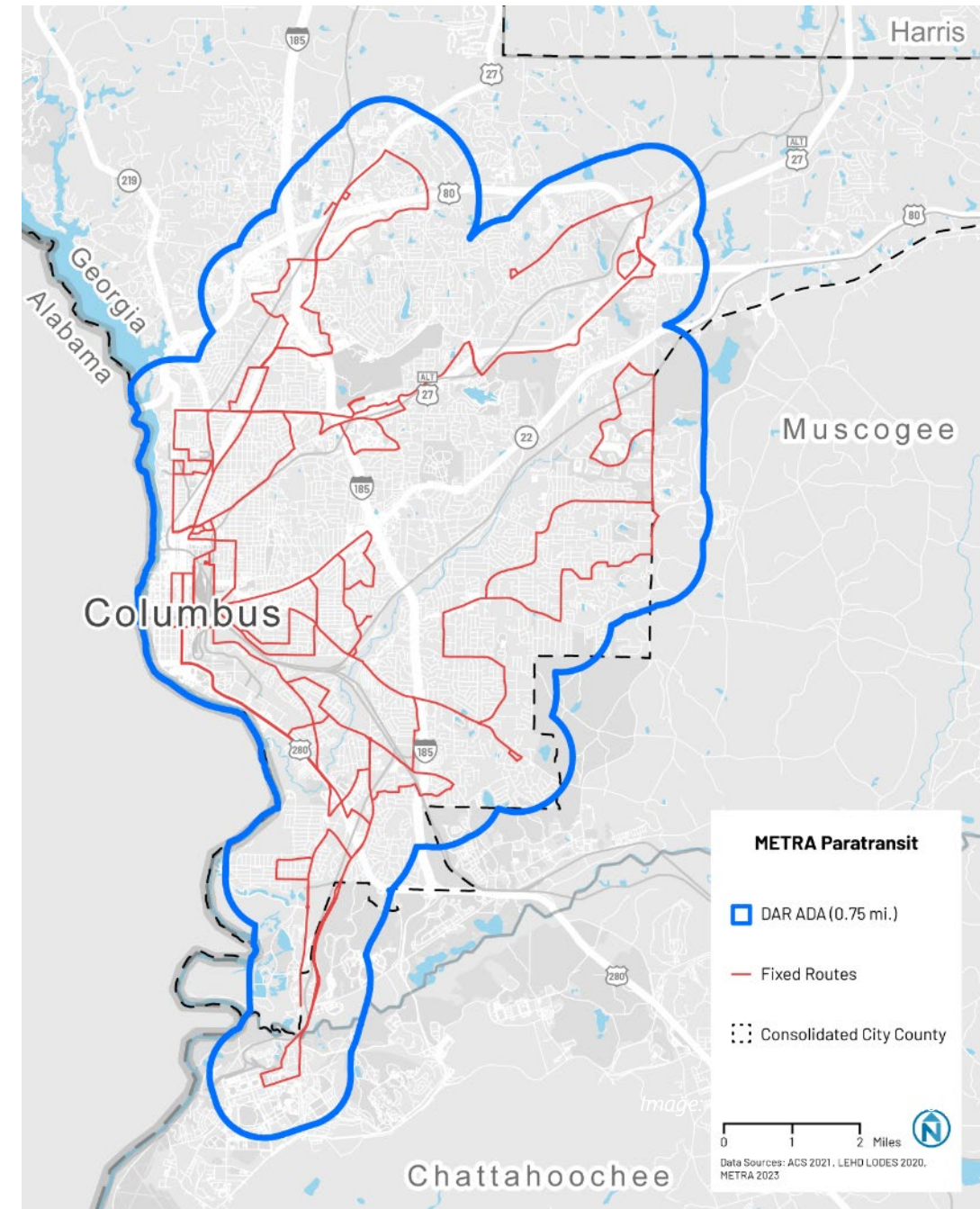
Demand Response and ADA

Demand-Response Transportation Explained

- Flexible transportation service that responds to trip requests with variable routes and schedules.
 - Differs from fixed-route bus service (e.g., METRA) operating on the same route and following a published schedule
 - Typically costs more than fixed-route bus service
- Customers request trips by calling or using a website/smartphone application.
- Types of demand-response transportation include:
 - For-hire vehicles (taxicabs, limousines, Lyft, Uber, etc.)
 - Shuttles, including microtransit (discussed later)
 - **Complementary or ADA paratransit (Dial-A-Ride)**
 - Premium paratransit

Complementary Paratransit: A Safety Net

- Complementary paratransit is a “safety net” for those whose functional disability prevents them from riding fixed-route service or traveling to/from bus stops.
- To use Dial-A-Ride service, one must apply to METRA and be determined “ADA paratransit eligible.”
- Eligible riders may be picked up or dropped off anywhere within 0.75 miles of METRA bus routes.



Key Complementary Paratransit Requirements

- To travel, eligible riders must contact METRA to reserve travel a least one day before a trip (no same-day service).
- **METRA may negotiate the pickup time (within limits) but must accommodate all next-day trip requests.**
- Dial-A-Ride is an origin-to-destination service and is either curb-to-curb or door-to-door depending on assistance needed
- **Capacity constraints are prohibited.**
- Service that operates outside of the 0.75-mile minimum required service area is known as a form of premium service.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person in a wheelchair. The person's hands are on the large rear wheels of the wheelchair. In the background, a white van is parked with its rear door open. A yellow wheelchair lift is extended from the van, and the wheelchair is being positioned on it. The scene is outdoors on a paved surface, with trees and a clear sky in the background. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

METRA's Dial-A-Ride

Dial-A-Ride Service Structure

- Total Dial-A-Ride service costs were approximately \$1.165 million in FY 23.
- Dial-A-Ride vehicles and operators (drivers) are separate from fixed route.
- Road supervision, vehicle maintenance, safety/training, and administration/management resources are shared with fixed route.
- While current staffing levels appear adequate to meet current demand, daily or hourly surges can present staffing challenges.

Dial-A-Ride Staffing Considerations

- One Dial-A-Ride vehicle operator handles reservations and scheduling
 - This reduces the available operator workforce
- To address surges or staffing shortages, supervisors and managers drive vehicles, operating in “firefighter mode”
- Relying on supervisors and managers to cover trips comes at a cost:
 - Other tasks cannot be completed, such as detailed data analysis, trend reporting, etc.
 - Too much time in “firefighter mode” increases stress on personnel
- **Current staffing levels are not sufficient to accommodate growth.**

Demand for Dial-A-Ride is Growing

- More people are applying for ADA paratransit eligibility
 - Less than 30 applications per year pre-COVID
 - 32 new applications received in calendar year 2022
 - 72 new applications received in first 10 months of 2023
- Current daily ridership is about 18 passengers per route, which is manageable, but before COVID, daily ridership often exceeded 20 passengers per route.
- **More staffing will be needed as growth continues, even without expanding the service area.**

Impacts of Growth in Demand

- As demand grows and riders request more trips, more resources will be needed.
- If additional resources are not provided or if pre-COVID ridership levels return:
 - On-time performance is likely to decline
 - Trip lengths (time on board the vehicle) are likely to increase
 - Overall service quality is likely to diminish
 - Employee quality of life will likely be affected

Fleet Challenges and Considerations

- Like other transit agencies, METRA faces challenges in replacing vehicles when they approach the end of their useful life (five years and 150,000 miles).
- Keeping older vehicles longer is permissible with a waiver, but maintenance costs increase.
- **METRA has been unable to maintain mechanic staffing levels and has five vacancies.**

Main Takeaways from Current Dial-A-Ride Service

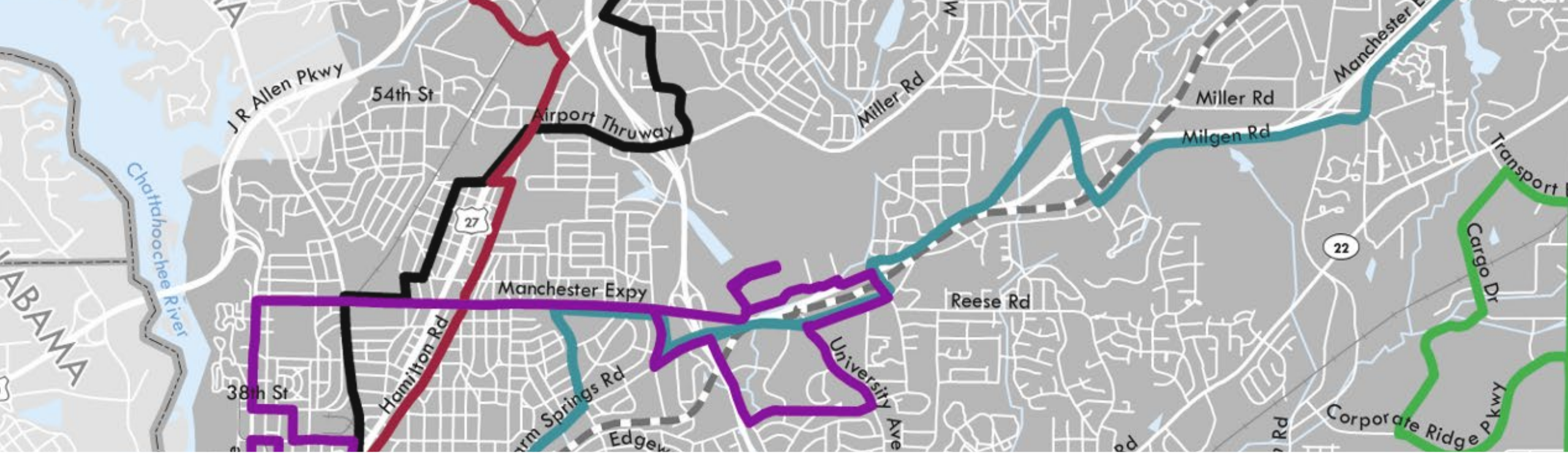
- Dial-A-Ride applications are growing
- **Staffing is not sufficient to accommodate increased demand even without service expansion**
- Better data are needed to track and report trends
- Keeping vehicle fleet longer will require more maintenance resources



Public Input to Date

Meetings Held October 3rd and 5th

- Participants asked questions and provided input on locations that premium service should serve, times that service should be provided, and other topics, including:
 - Serve the **Brookstone area (neighborhood)**
 - Provide direct access to the **VA Clinic**
 - Serve the **Georgia Department of Driver Services** for those who need to obtain an ID card
 - Provide service from the YMCA after 8 p.m.
 - Serve areas of new development to the north
 - Add kiosks to obtain fare cards at Walmart, Publix, etc.



Premium Service Proposal and Considerations

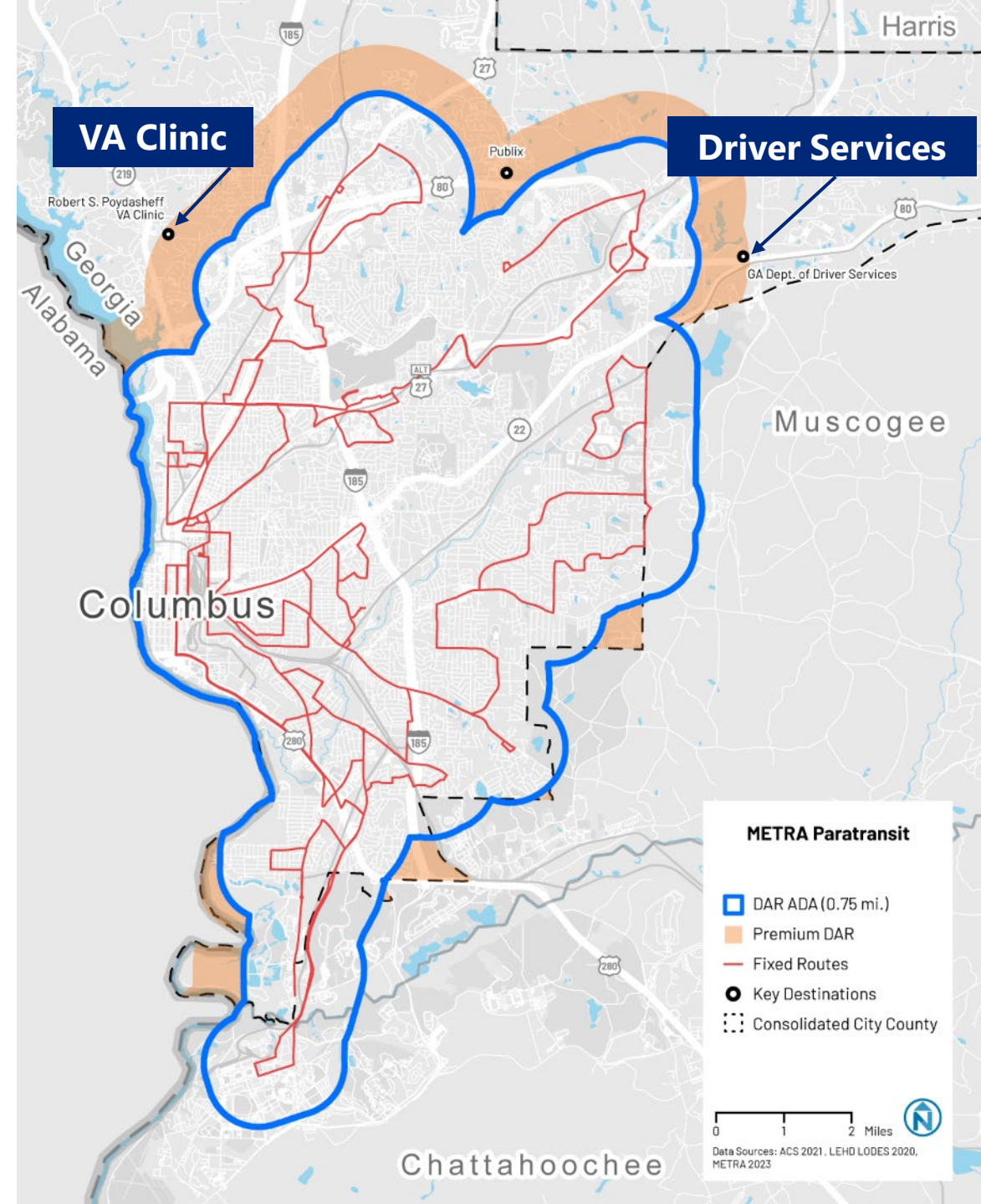


Regulatory Context

- Per ADA, the current Dial-A-Ride complementary paratransit service area includes pickup and drop-off locations 0.75 miles on either side of METRA bus routes.
- Transit agencies may offer premium service beyond 0.75 miles but **must still ensure the required complementary paratransit has no capacity constraints and continues to meet all ADA requirements.**

Recommended Premium Service Area

- The recommended **premium service area** includes locations within the consolidated city/county boundary but no more than 1.5 miles from METRA bus routes.
- Two locations are included that extend beyond 1.5 miles:
 - GA Department of Driver Services
 - VA Clinic
- The additional premium service area adds 13.17 square miles to the Dial-A-Ride service area.



Premium Service Demand

- Current Dial-A-Ride service area has just under 160,000 residents
- Just under 14,000 people reside in the premium service area (U.S. Census)
- **Introducing premium service is projected to add approximately 2,500 trips per year**
- Delivering premium service will increase the number of **vehicle hours** that Dial-A-Ride is provided and will increase the number of **miles** Dial-A-Ride vehicles are driven

Area	Residents	Comment
Current service area	159,493	0.75 miles of METRA bus routes
Within premium service area	13,718	Within City/County boundary

Premium Service Costs and Recommendations

- To meet additional demand, the following additional operating resources are recommended:

Item	Cost
Vehicle operators (3)	\$159,300
Scheduler (1)	\$53,100
Fuel and maintenance	\$35,800
Other administrative costs	\$22,000
Total estimated additional costs per year	\$270,200

- These yearly costs will increase with inflation.
- The current fleet size is likely sufficient in the short term, but it is recommended that the Dial-A-Ride fleet be expanded in FY 2025.

Recommended Operating Policies: Premium Service Startup

- To continue to meet the ADA requirements for Dial-A-Ride, the following **premium service policies** are recommended:
 - Riders can request premium trips no more than one day prior to travel
 - In responding to premium trip requests, pickup times offered would be based on capacity available
 - If no space is available, premium trips may need to be added to a waiting list
 - Fares would be the same as for current Dial-A-Ride service
- The team recommends that the Columbus Council formally adopt premium service policies that should be published in the rider guide and METRA's website.

Premium Service Considerations

- Expanding the service area may result in immediate rider growth but trips would begin to increase.
- Better data is needed and should be compiled to show trends in demand, costs, and challenges and additional administrative staffing may be needed for this purpose.
- Future premium service policy revisions may be needed once demand is better understood.

Premium Service Summary

- Expand the service area up to 1.5 miles of bus routes within consolidated city/county boundary and include Driver Services and VA Clinic.
- Prioritize delivering required Dial-A-Ride within ADA service area without capacity constraints.
- Adopt premium service policies that ensure compliance with ADA.
- Increase Dial-A-Ride funding by at least \$270,200 to add 3 operators and 1 scheduler, and cover fuel, maintenance, and related expenses.
- Plan to add two new vehicles to the Dial-A-Ride fleet in FY 2025.
- Collect data and monitor demand to ensure resources are adequate and adjust policies and funding accordingly.



Discussion

Next Steps

- Virtual public meetings on Zoom
 - Monday December 11, 2023, 12-1:30 p.m.
 - Tuesday December 12, 2023, 6-7:30 p.m.
- Draft report by end of December
- Final report by January 19, 2024



Demand-Response Options

Demand-Response Transportation Options

- Demand-response services include
 - For-hire vehicles (taxicabs, Lyft, Uber, etc.)
 - Shuttle services, including microtransit (next slide)
 - Complementary paratransit (Dial-A-Ride)
 - Other paratransit, including premium Dial-A-Ride
- The “response” part of demand-response service varies from booking multiple days in advance to receiving a trip within xx minutes.

Microtransit

- Microtransit has exploded due to growth of smartphone applications, transforming demand-response marketplace
 - Most trips provided via smartphone, but call-in option is still needed
- Can be delivered as on-demand or reservations-based
 - In most cases, trips are provided with a relatively short wait time
- Operates within a defined area or zone

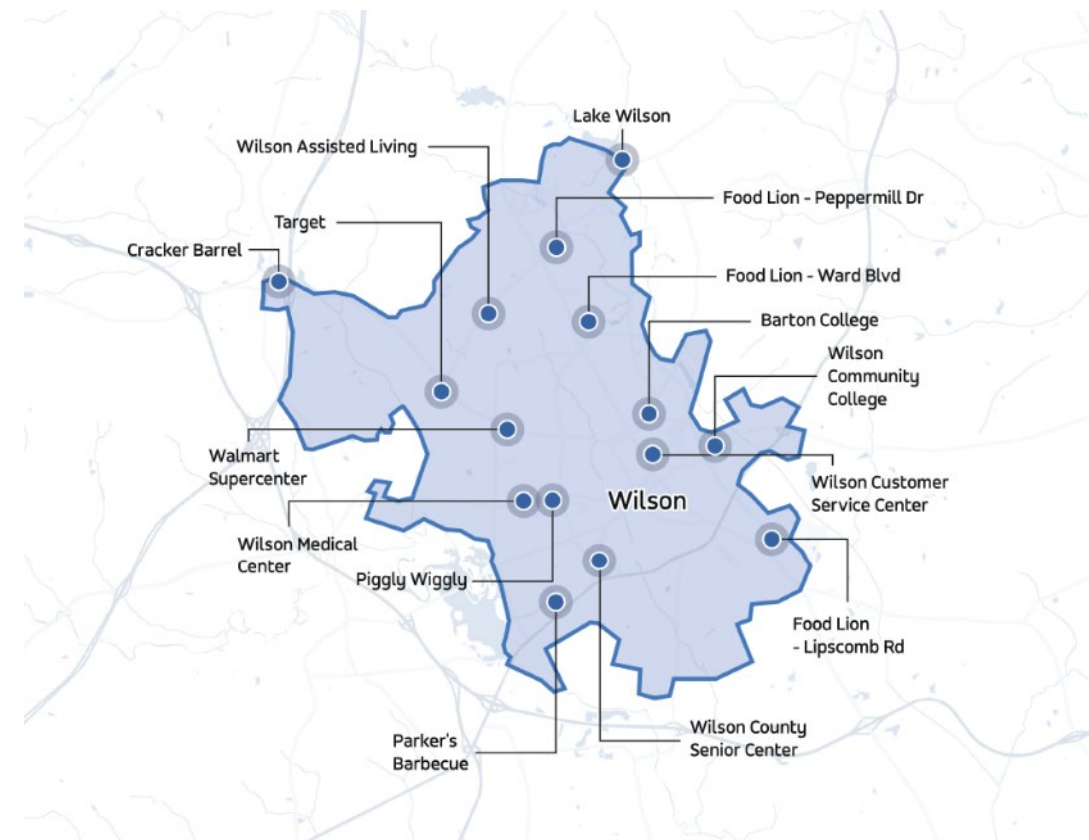
Fixed-Route Connection

- Bring riders to and from other transit services or major centers of activity
- Sometimes called first-mile/last-mile (FM/LM) service
- Operates during the same hours as fixed route and integrates schedules to arrive at bus stops or transfer locations to minimize rider wait times.
- **Requires frequent bus service to be viable.**
- Example: Seattle, Washington



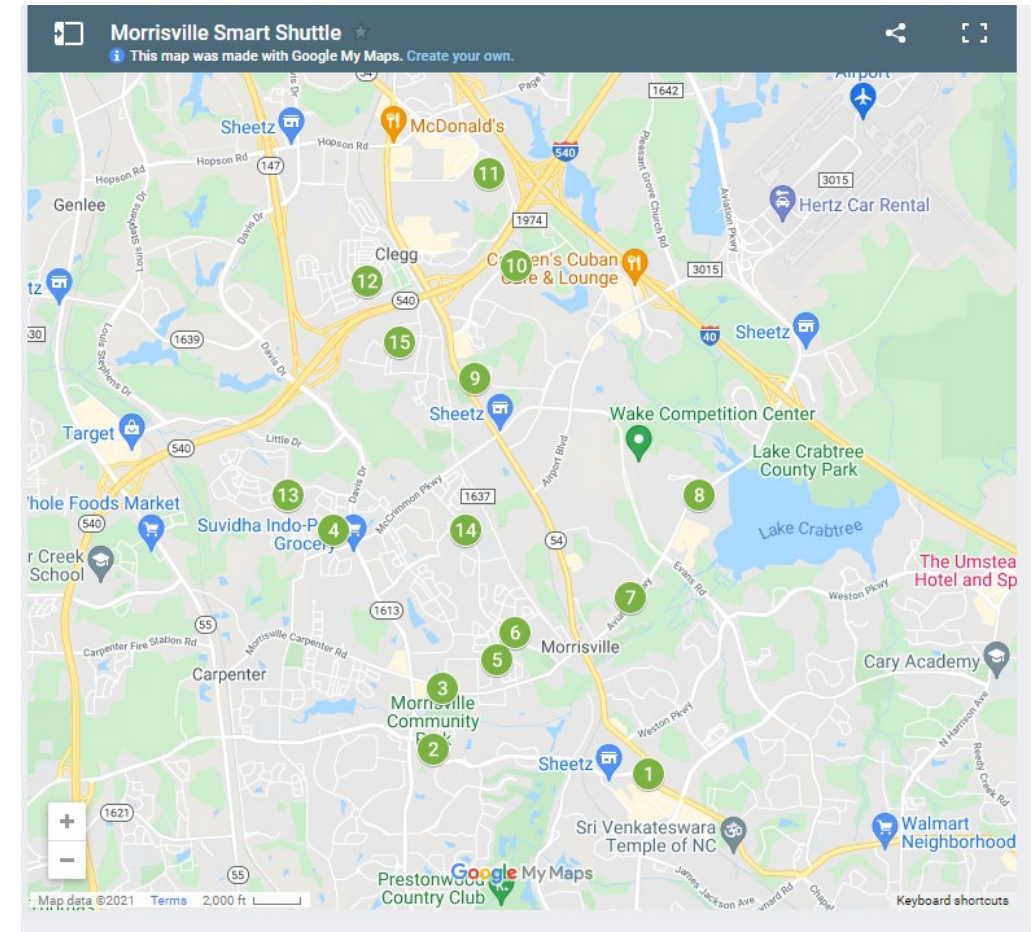
Replacement for Fixed-Route

- Full replacement of fixed-route service with on-demand service.
- Covers more geography but requires more vehicles.
- Work better in zones with activity throughout the day (school, work, medical, retail)
- Integrated road network required to minimize travel times
- **Can have much higher operating costs as service becomes more popular.**
- Example: Wilson, North Carolina



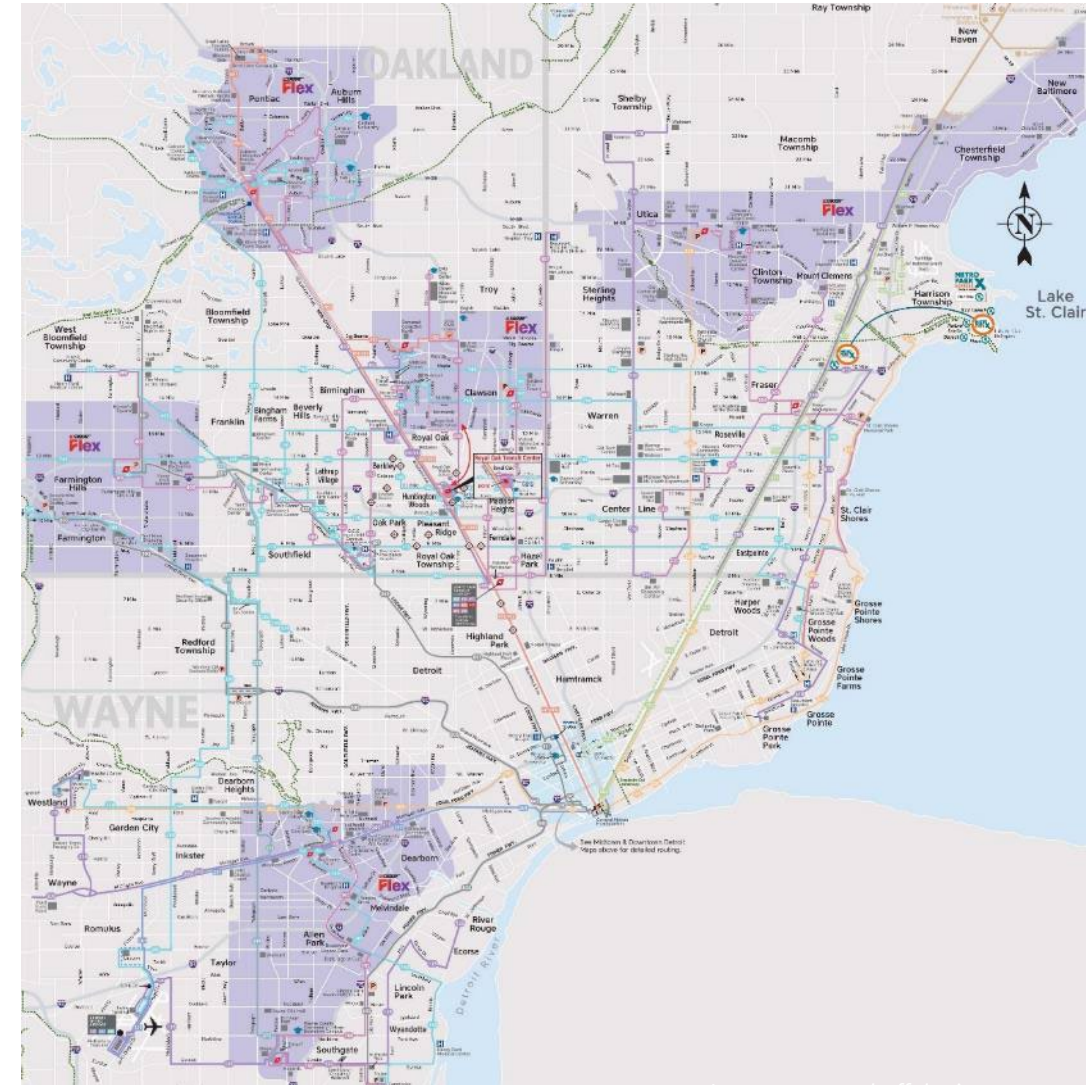
Node-Based Service

- Connects predetermined pickup and drop-off locations
- Offers on-demand connections between any two nodes
- If no demand at certain zones, riders receive more direct trips (i.e., vehicle skips intervening stop)
- **Can have very high operating costs**
- Example: Morrisville, North Carolina



Zone Coverage

- Service operates only within designated zones
- May connect with fixed route and limit microtransit trips when fixed route service is available
- Requires at least two vehicles per zone to operate “on demand”
- Recommended zone size 6 square miles or less
- Example: Suburban Detroit, Michigan



Demand-Response/Microtransit Considerations

- **Service does not need to be on-demand to be responsive.**
 - Tailor service to the market, which can vary within a region.
 - A guaranteed trip is preferable to one that is not on time or cannot be confirmed.
 - Using multiple providers may be preferable (taxis, Uber/Lyft, microtransit vendor, METRA).
- **Service cannot discriminate against people with disabilities.**
 - ADA requirements apply, meaning those who need to ride in a wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAV) must not receive a lower quality of service.
- **While intended as a shared ride service, actual ridesharing is sometimes hard to achieve.**
 - The level of sharing depends on the types of trips and time of day.

Demand-Response/Microtransit Considerations

- **New service should not cannibalize fixed-route service.**
 - Offering microtransit in fixed-route areas with faster connections will draw some bus riders
 - Fare policy is a key consideration
- **Delivery costs vary according to the demand, but certain costs are fixed.**
- **Service sustainability is an important consideration.**
 - A focused market and financial analysis is needed.
- **When designing new demand-response services, a recommended rule of thumb is to “under-promise and over-deliver.”**



Discussion

Thank you!



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