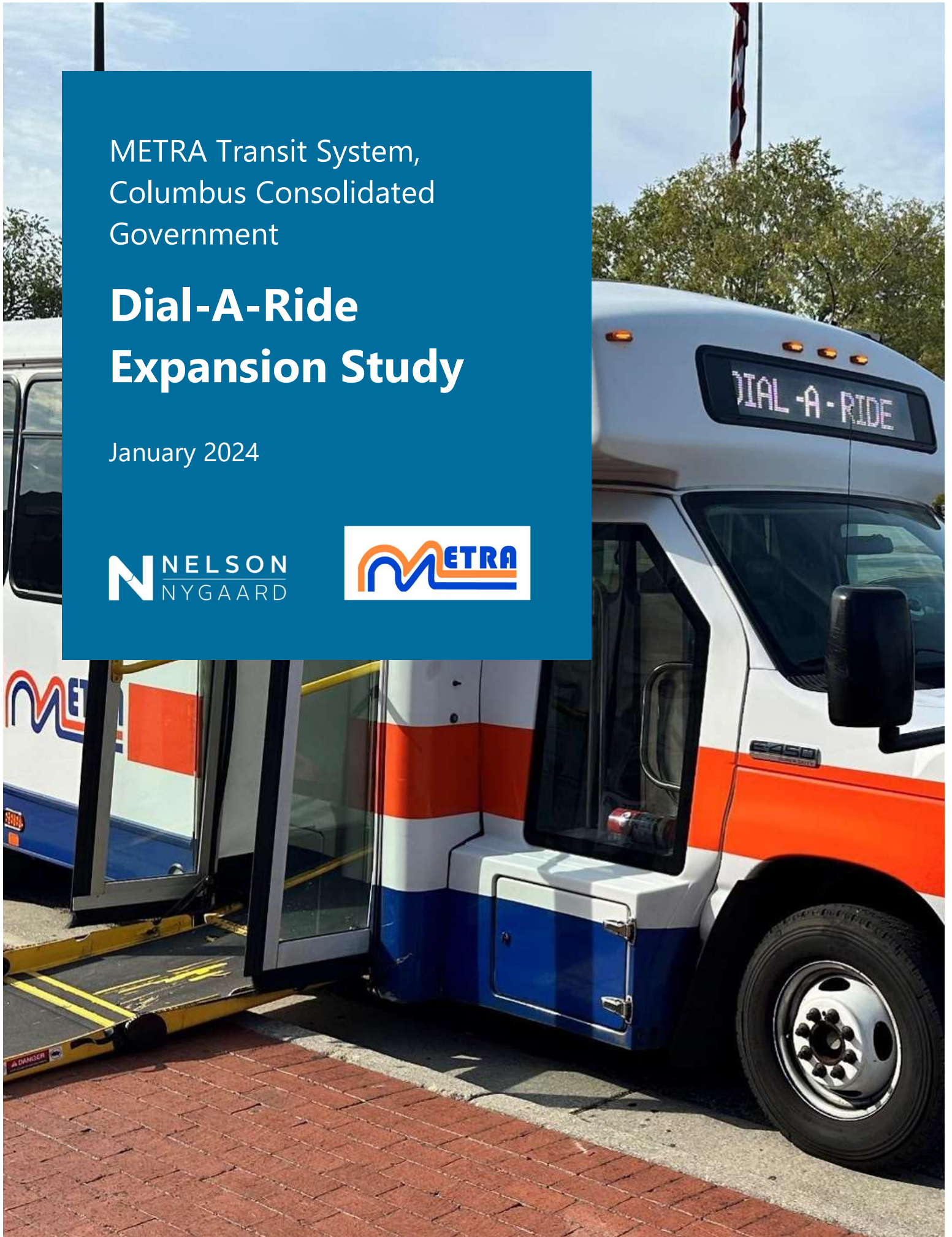


METRA Transit System,
Columbus Consolidated
Government

Dial-A-Ride Expansion Study

January 2024

N NELSON
NYGAARD



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Appendix Materials

October 3, and October 5, 2023 Public Meeting Slides

December 5, 2023 Columbus Council Presentation Slides

1 INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the results of a study to expand paratransit service in the Columbus, Georgia urban area. It provides background for the study, describes the current service, and summarizes public input received. It also estimates future demand and recommends a service delivery strategy along with policy guidance and related recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The Columbus, Georgia Consolidated Government (Columbus) operates METRA Transit System, a public transportation service with ten fixed-route bus routes that operate Monday to Saturday. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) also requires METRA to provide complementary paratransit (Dial-A-Ride) for eligible riders whose disabilities prevent them from traveling to/from or from using METRA buses. Dial-A-Ride is an “origin-to-destination” service that operates between locations within 0.75 miles of METRA’s bus routes whenever METRA buses operate.

On August 22, 2023, a Dial-A-Ride rider appeared before the Columbus Council and requested Dial-A-Ride service be available to/from a location outside the 0.75-mile 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. The city then engaged Nelson\Nygaard to evaluate the expanded service area policy.

STUDY SCOPE

The scope of work included an evaluation of Dial-A-Ride service, including whether METRA has capacity to meet the ADA requirements, sought public input on where additional service is needed, estimated demand and costs for service area expansion, and recommended ways to deliver expanded or “premium” service while continuing to comply with the ADA requirements.

2 DIAL-A-RIDE SERVICE

This chapter describes METRA's Dial-A-Ride service in the context of the complementary paratransit requirements under the ADA. In Columbus, METRA's complementary paratransit service is known as Dial-a-Ride. Information is based on data provided by METRA staff, observations made at METRA's offices in October 2023, and follow up interviews.

ADA PARATRANSIT REQUIREMENTS

Pursuant to the U.S. Department of Transportation's regulations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as a fixed-route bus service provider, METRA must provide complementary paratransit service to eligible individuals whose disabilities prevent them from traveling to/from bus stops or from using fixed-route buses. METRA must offer this service within 0.75 mile of either side of non-commuter bus routes, whenever fixed-route buses operate (i.e., the same service spans) and without regard to the rider's trip purpose. Fares cannot be more than twice the regular fixed-route base fare for each trip. Further, complementary paratransit service must operate without capacity constraints, meaning METRA must provide sufficient vehicles and drivers to ensure riders' complementary paratransit trips take about the same time as taking the bus and that the paratransit vehicles arrive at pickup locations on time.

DIAL-A-RIDE SERVICE REQUIREMENTS

This section describes the main elements and requirements of complementary paratransit (Dial-a-Ride) as presented at the public meetings and to the Columbus Council.

A "Safety Net" Service

Dial-A-Ride is offered as a type of "safety net" for those whose functional disability prevents them from traveling to/from METRA bus stops or riding METRA's fixed-route buses.

Limited to Eligible Riders

To use Dial-A-Ride, one must first apply to METRA and be determined "ADA paratransit eligible." See separate discussion of eligibility.

ADA Service Area and Same Operating Times

ADA requires that Dial-A-Ride service be made available to eligible riders for travel anywhere within 0.75 miles of METRA bus routes at the same times that bus service is operating. Figure 1 shows METRA's bus routes, the current Dial-A-Ride service area, and the consolidated city-county boundary. The Dial-A-Ride service area extends beyond the consolidated city-county boundary to meet the ADA requirements.

Next-Day Service and Trip Reservations

The ADA requires METRA to provide next-day service at a minimum and to offer telephone reservations during METRA's business hours. METRA must offer a voicemail option for riders to request trips following days when METRA's buses do not operate (Sundays and holidays)

METRA must accommodate all next-day Dial-A-Ride trip requests. Consistent with ADA, METRA offers riders the opportunity to reserve Dial-A-Ride trips up to 14 days prior to travel. ADA permits METRA to negotiate the pickup time as much as one hour before or one hour after the requested time, but the time offered must be feasible. For example, METRA may not offer to pick up a rider before the end of the rider's workday.

For riders traveling to and from the same destination on a recurring basis, METRA offers standing reservations, also known as subscription service. The ADA permits METRA to offer standing reservations but limits this to half of all trips during hours when service capacity is constrained.

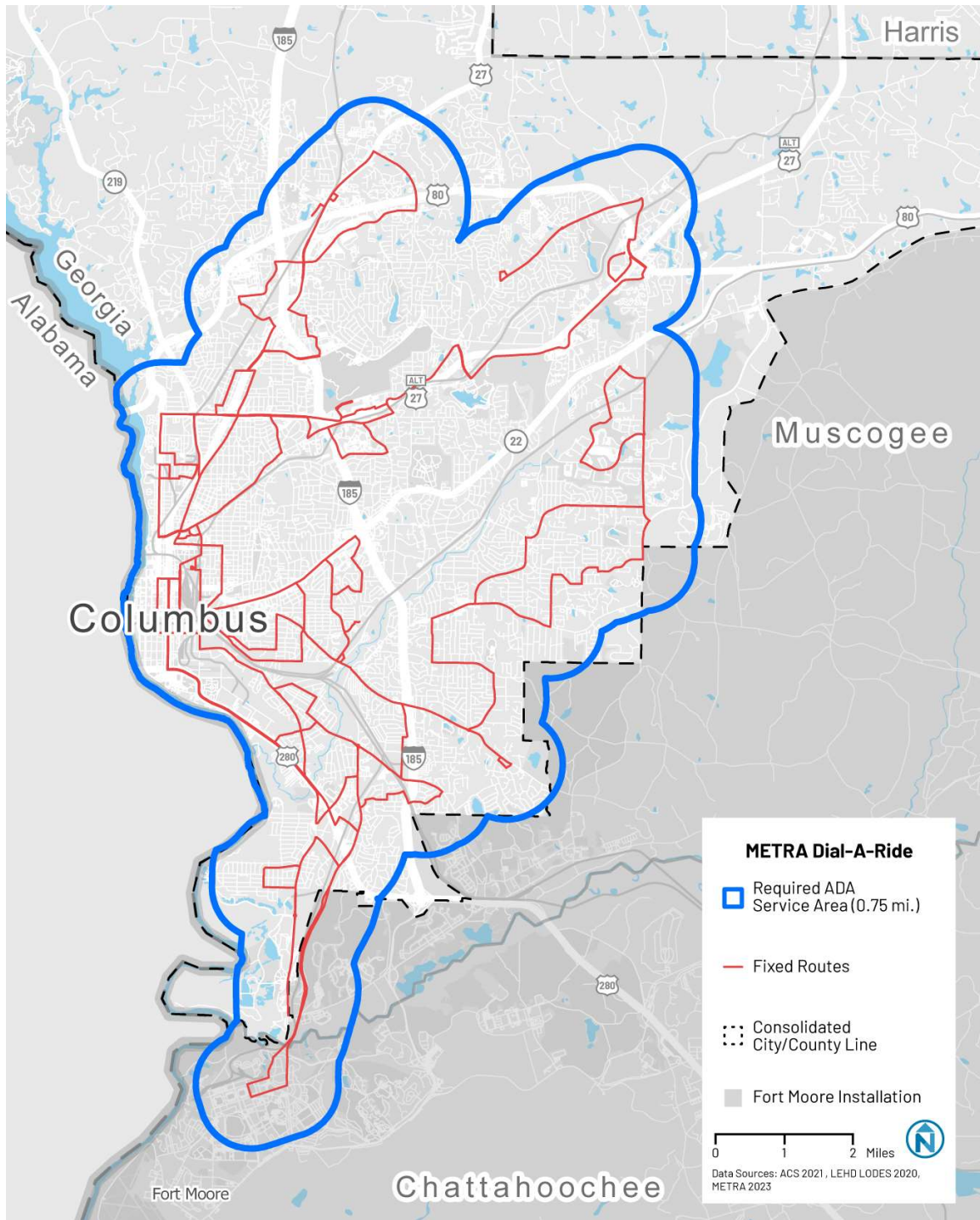
Fares

The maximum fare that can be charged to eligible riders of Dial-A-Ride-type services is twice the fare that would be charged for the same trip on a fixed route. METRA's fixed-route fare is \$1.30, and the Dial-A-Ride fare is \$2.50.

Attendants and Companions

Attendants are those who assist riders during transport or at their destination. Companions are people traveling with eligible riders. METRA must always accommodate one attendant at no fare. METRA must accommodate one companion (same fare as the rider). METRA accommodates additional companions on a space-available basis.

Figure 1 Current Dial-A-Ride Service Area



PROHIBITED CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS

Because access to Dial-A-Ride service is considered a civil right under ADA, constraints on access to the service are not allowed. Types of possible capacity constraints addressed by the ADA regulations include trip caps, waiting lists, trip denials, missed trips, poor on-time performance, excessively long ride times, and long telephone hold times. Following is a discussion of each.

Trip Caps

There can be no trip caps for Dial-A-Ride-type service. These might include a limit on the number of trips that can be taken per day or per month. METRA does not use trip caps. Eligible riders can request and take as many trips as they need within the defined service area at the times the service is operated.

Waiting Lists

There can be no waiting lists for non-subscription service. Waiting lists are allowed for subscription service, but if subscription status is not provided, riders must be able to request and make the trip on a non-subscription basis. As discussed in the next chapter, waiting lists can also be used for non-ADA service (premium service).

Trip Denials

ADA prohibits a pattern or practice of denying a substantial number of trips on Dial-A-Ride-type services. The FTA ADA Circular¹ suggests that transit agencies have a goal of meeting 100% of paratransit demand and having no trip denials. Any denials should be singular events and represent a low percentage of all trip requests.

METRA has no recorded trip denials. See discussion of how METRA manages surges in demand and/or staffing shortages below.

Missed Trips

ADA considers Dial-A-Ride-type services to be capacity constrained if there is a pattern or practice of a substantial number of missed trips. A missed trip occurs when a vehicle arrives late (past the on-time window), and riders do not take the trip—either are not there or elect not to go. Missed trips also occur when vehicles arrive early, and riders do not make the trip

¹ See <https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/fta-circulars/americans-disabilities-act-guidance-pdf>

because they are not yet ready to go. Missed trips should be a small percentage of all trips scheduled—typically no more than 0.5 percent of all scheduled trips.

METRA data shows no recorded missed trips. See discussion of how METRA manages surges in demand and/or staffing shortages below.

Poor On-time Performance (OTP)

A capacity constraint is present if there is a pattern or practice of a substantial number of untimely pickups or drop-offs. METRA's on-time window is from the time of the scheduled pickup to 15 minutes after ("plus 15"). The METRA staff strives to pick up and drop off its riders on time. Data provided to the consultant team showed excellent OTP. See discussion of how METRA manages surges in demand and/or staffing shortages below.

Excessive Ride Times

A pattern or practice of a substantial number of trips with excessively long ride times is considered a type of noncompliant capacity constraint. The ADA Circular notes that paratransit ride times should be comparable to times required to make the same trip on fixed route. At present, ride times on Dial-A-Ride are typically less than on METRA buses and are almost never longer. See discussion of how METRA manages surges in demand and/or staffing shortages below.

Long Telephone Hold Times

A final type of possible capacity constraint is long telephone hold times. Riders can be discouraged from using the service if they are not able to easily get through on the phone to make trip reservations or to check on late rides. METRA's telephone system rolls over calls to other staff when the reservations line is busy, and the team is cross trained to answer forwarded telephone calls.

ELIGIBILITY

The ADA regulations require that transit agencies that provide ADA paratransit service also have a process in place for determining who is "ADA paratransit eligible." The regulations define specific eligibility criteria. To keep ADA paratransit sustainable, the regulations require that the eligibility process "strictly limit" eligibility to individuals who meet these criteria.

To be eligible for paratransit service, individuals must have a disability that prevents them from using fixed route transit service some or all the time. They might not be able to get to and from the fixed route stops they need to use, board or ride a fixed-route vehicle,

understand how to use fixed-route service, or how to navigate the system. The regulations define “prevent” to mean using fixed-route service would require an unreasonable level of effort or risk.

Application Process

METRA has a two-part, 15-page application form consisting of applicant-provided information and information required of treating professionals. After calling METRA, applicants may receive the application by mail, email, or fax, or pick it up at METRA offices.

Once METRA receives a completed application, including medical verification, METRA schedules an applicant interview and provides free transportation to those who request a ride.

Growth in Dial-A-Ride Applications

The number of applications for Dial-A-Ride eligibility is increasing, indicating a growing demand for the service within the community. Prior to the COVID pandemic, METRA received less than 30 applications per year. In 2022, METRA received 32 new applications, but in just the first ten months of 2023, METRA received 72 new applications.

The growth in applications is a leading indicator of increased demand for Dial-A-Ride service.

Trip Cancellation and No-Show Policies

The ADA regulations permit transit agencies to “establish an administrative process to suspend, for a reasonable period of time, the provision of complementary paratransit service to ADA-eligible individuals who establish a pattern or practice of missing scheduled trips [no shows].” FTA guidance expands this to include late cancellations (e.g., less than two hours before the scheduled pickup time) as a type of no-show. The guidance directs agencies to define no-shows and late cancellations and ensure trips were not missed because vehicles did not arrive on time. Additional guidance on how to determine a pattern or practice as well as a sample policy, are provided in the ADA Circular.

As noted in the Rider Guide, METRA does not have a no-show policy but encourages customers to cancel two hours before their scheduled pickup time. The consultant team recommends the adoption of a formal policy regarding no-shows and late cancellations, including possible suspensions of riders that violate the policy.

DIAL-A-RIDE SERVICE DELIVERY

Total Dial-A-Ride service costs were approximately \$1.165 million in FY 23. Funding is from the Federal Transit Administration, TSPLOST, Columbus Consolidated Government, and fare revenues. Expenses for vehicle operators, vehicle maintenance, fuel, uniforms, administration, and other items, include resources shared with other METRA business units.

Staffing

Current staffing includes 11 Dial-A-Ride operators (drivers) (separate from fixed-route bus operators). One Dial-A-Ride vehicle operator handles reservations and scheduling. The ADA Coordinator oversees the service and manages the eligibility process. The Transit Manager is responsible for both Dial-A-Ride and fixed-route bus service. Other resources shared between Dial-A-Ride and fixed-route service include road supervision, vehicle maintenance, safety/training, and administration/management. While current staffing levels appear adequate to meet current demand, daily or hourly surges can present staffing challenges.

Limitations with Current Staffing

The use of a vehicle operator to handle trip reservations reduces the available operator workforce. During times of surges in demand or when staff are on leave or call in sick, road supervisors and METRA managers drive vehicles, operating in “firefighter mode.” Relying on supervisors and managers to cover trips comes at a cost, however. 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, even without expanding the service area.

Ridership

According to staff, METRA can accommodate 15-20 daily trips per bus without risking capacity constraints and longer trip times. Before the pandemic, when daily trip demand often exceeded 25, on-time performance was lower. As ridership grows, METRA will need staff to meet demand within the current service area.

Fleet Challenges and Consideration

METRA faces challenges in replacing vehicles approaching the end of their useful life. FTA defines the useful life of vehicles in the same category as METRA’s Dial-a-Ride vehicles as five years and 150,000 miles. Five of the 14 Dial-A-Ride vehicles are four years old and have

covered at least 335,000 miles, while two are three years old and have exceeded 95,000 miles. The industry-wide delay in replacing vehicles can span 1-2 years, which may require METRA to obtain waivers from the FTA to continue using vehicles beyond their designated life.

Obtaining waivers will increase maintenance costs since as vehicles age, the frequency and cost of repairs rise. METRA has five mechanic positions unfilled, limiting the ability to maintain the existing fleet.

SUMMARY

The following are the main findings of the evaluation of METRA's current Dial-A-Ride paratransit service.

- METRA operates Dial-A-Ride service as a complement to fixed-route bus service, and includes areas within 0.75 miles of bus routes, some of which extend beyond the Columbus Consolidated Government boundary.
- The number of people applying for Dial-A-Ride eligibility is increasing at a far higher rate than in previous years.
- Covering surges in demand or staff leave with supervisors and managers is not a sustainable practice.
- More staffing is needed to meet growth in Dial-A-Ride service even without service expansion, including office staff and vehicle operators.
- Better data and reporting tools and procedures are needed to track growth in demand and quality of service.
- Keeping Dial-A-Ride vehicles longer than their useful life will require more maintenance and increase costs.
- Unfilled positions (mechanics) limits METRA's capacity to maintain its fleet.

3 STUDY OUTREACH

Study outreach included public input sessions in October 2023, the opportunity to contact METRA directly, and a presentation to the Columbus Council followed by public presentations. METRA staff publicized all meetings on its website, through emails, and other communications channels.

OCTOBER INPUT SESSIONS

Public input sessions were held on October 3, 2023, and October 5, 2023. Both meetings included brief presentations by the city manager's office and by METRA staff. The consultant team then explained the ADA requirements and considerations for providing premium service. The consultant team then asked participants to indicate the locations they would like to travel to on Dial-A-Ride or other times they wished to travel. A copy of the presentation slides used for the meeting is provided in the appendix. Participants noted:

Locations for New Service

- Brookstone neighborhood, specifically portions outside the current Dial-a-Ride service area
- Robert S. Poydasheff VA Clinic at River Road and Mobley Road
- Georgia Department of Driver Services, specifically for those needing to obtain a state identification card

Locations for Expanded Service

- YMCA after 8 p.m.

COLUMBUS COUNCIL PRESENTATION

On December 5, 2023, the consultant team presented the study findings at a regular meeting of the Columbus Council. A copy of the presentation slides used for the meeting is presented in the appendix.

VIRTUAL PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS

Two virtual public presentations were held on Zoom. The first was held at 12 p.m. on Monday, December 11, 2023. Approximately five individuals attended excluding staff. The second meeting was held at 6 p.m. on Tuesday December 12, 2023. No participants attended the second meeting. The slide presentation given for the Monday meeting was very similar to the slides used for the Columbus Council meeting.

4 PREMIUM SERVICE

REGULATORY CONTEXT

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. The ADA permits METRA to offer premium service beyond 0.75 miles but requires METRA to ensure that Dial-A-Ride service continues to operate without capacity constraints and continues to meet all ADA requirements. This means accommodating all eligible ADA trip requests and maintaining service quality, even if the demand continues to increase.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

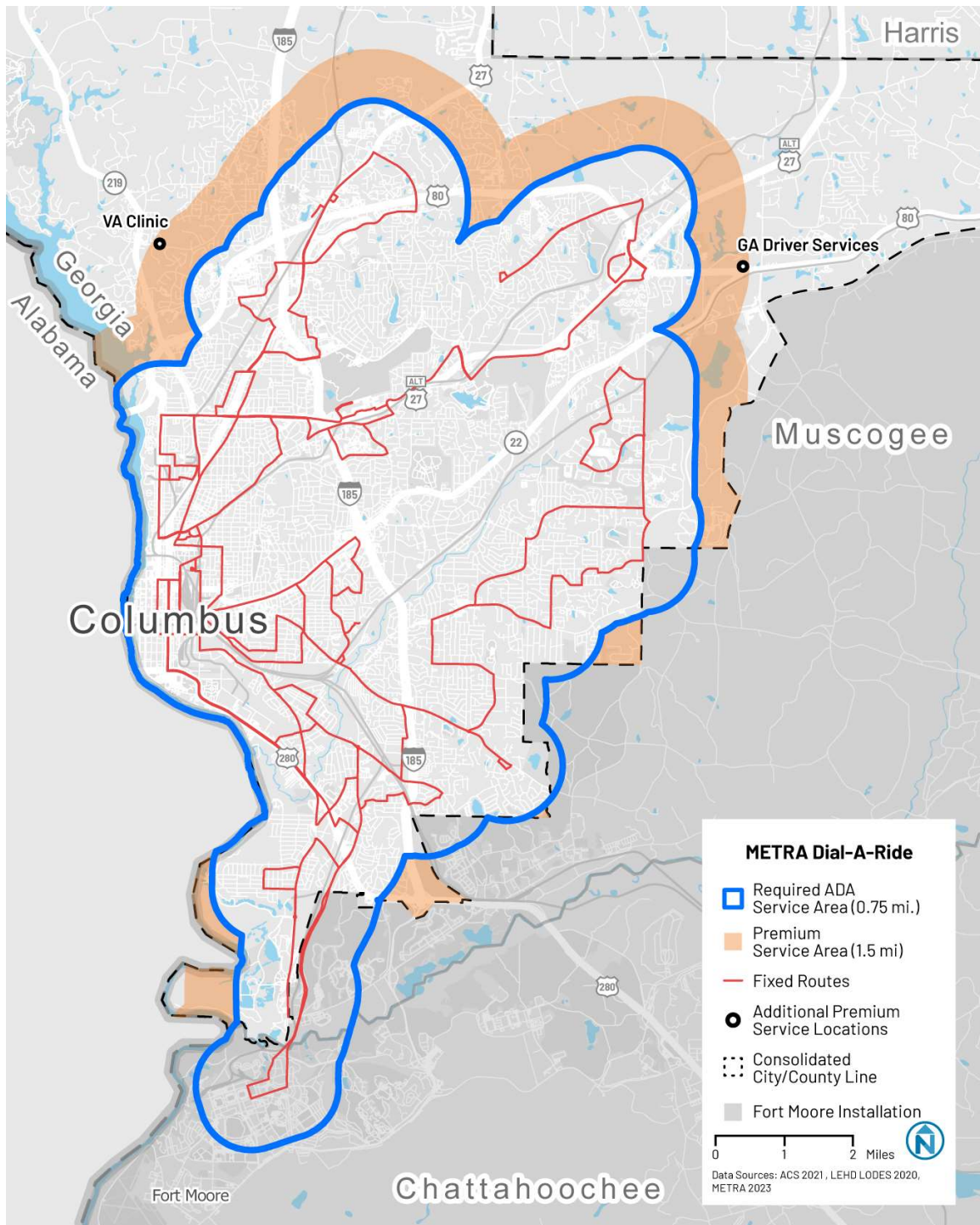
Premium Service Area

At its meeting on August 22, 2023, the Columbus Council voted to expand the Dial-A-Ride service area to 1.5 miles of fixed-route bus routes. Based on public input on where additional service was needed, input from METRA staff, and an analysis of demographic data, the consultant team developed a modified premium service area. The recommended area for premium service extends up to 1.5 miles but does not extend beyond the consolidated city-county boundary. In addition, Dial-A-Ride will serve 8397 Macon Road (Georgia Department of Driver Services) and 6910 River Road (Robert S. Poydasheff VA Clinic). This additional premium service area adds 15.24 square miles to the total Dial-A-Ride service area, as shown in Figure 2.

Premium Service Demand

According to the U.S. Census, just under 14,000 people reside in the premium service area. Introducing premium service is projected to add approximately 2,500 trips per year, which in turn will increase the number of vehicle hours that Dial-A-Ride service is provided and increase the number of miles Dial-A-Ride vehicles are driven.

Figure 2 Proposed Service Area Expansion



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

METRA's costs are anticipated to increase to accommodate current growth within the ADA service area and to serve additional riders and trips in the expanded service area. The estimated added cost in the first year is \$270,200, which will grow with inflation. The breakdown of costs is shown in Figure 3, which includes costs for three additional Dial-A-Ride vehicle operators, a dedicated scheduler, and other costs (fuel, maintenance, and administration).

Figure 3 Dial-A-Ride Added Operating Costs

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

Note: this includes funding to accommodate current growth in demand and for premium service

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.

Expanding the Dial-A-Ride service area may not result in immediate rider growth, but trips would begin to increase, particularly by existing riders. Better data is needed to show trends in demand, costs, and challenges, and additional administrative staffing may be needed for this purpose.

Fleet Expansion

METRA should begin expanding its Dial-A-Ride fleet in Fiscal Year 2025 to add two new vehicles.

RECOMMENDED POLICIES

To ensure METRA continues to meet its obligations under the ADA, the following premium service policies are recommended:

- Any trip within either a pickup or a drop-off located outside the ADA service area (0.75 mile of METRA bus routes) is a premium trip.
- Eligible riders may request a premium trip no more than one day prior to travel.

- METRA will accommodate premium trip requests based on space available. This may mean offering times more than one hour before or after the requested time, placing the request on a waiting list, or denying the trip request altogether.
- Premium fares will be the same as for Dial-A-Ride ADA service.
- Premium service policies are subject to further changes based on capacity and demand.

The team recommends that the Columbus Council formally adopt premium service policies that should be published in the rider guide and METRA's website.

PERFORMANCE MONITORING

Better data is needed and should be compiled to track trends in demand and costs. The following are suggested metrics:

Service Delivery Data

METRA staff should compile, track, and report data for the following indicators. Data should be compiled for the following at least monthly and compared both with the prior month and showing trends over time. Should premium trips or overall costs increase above the estimated levels or should demand for ADA service continue to grow further, more resources may be needed.

- Trips provided for ADA and premium service
- Trips waitlisted for premium service (not permitted for ADA)
- Trips denied for premium service (not permitted for ADA)
- Revenue hours for ADA and premium service
- Vehicle miles for ADA and premium service
- Overtime hours/costs
- Available roadworthy vehicles
- Unfilled positions (operators, mechanics, other positions)
- Runs covered by supervisory staff
- Maintenance costs
- Vehicles exceeding recommended useful life

SUMMARY

The following are the main recommendations for premium service.

- Expand the service area up to 1.5 miles of bus routes within the Columbus consolidated city-county boundary and include the Georgia Department of Driver Services and Robert S. Poydasheff 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 three operators and one 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.

APPENDIX MATERIALS

1. October 3, and October 5, 2023 Public Meeting Slides
2. December 5, 2023 Columbus Council Presentation Slides

October 3 & 5, 2023



Dial-A-Ride Expansion Study

Bill Schwartz, Nelson\Nygaard

Milbrey Heard, Nelson\Nygaard



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 Overview
- 3 Questions on Study and ADA
- 4 Service Expansion Discussion





Study Overview

Study Overview

The Dial-A-Ride Expansion Study will:

- Evaluate existing services to ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Understand current and potential new rider needs for premium services
- Determine the demand for and estimate costs of service area expansion
- Suggest options for meeting additional demand



Study Schedule (October through January)

October 2023	November 2023	December 2023	January 2024
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Hold initial public meetings▪ Collect and analyze data▪ Estimate demand, costs, and options	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Complete and refine analysis with staff input▪ Hold information and comment sessions week of 11/27/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Transmit draft report for City of Columbus review▪ Present to Council on 12/12/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Transmit final report by 1/19/24

Public input opportunities: October 3 and 5 and week of November 27th

Comments also welcome via email: metroinfo@columbusga.org or via phone: (706) 225-4673



ADA Overview

Americans with Disabilities Act Requirements

- As a provider of fixed-route public transportation, METRA is obligated under ADA to provide complementary paratransit
- Complementary paratransit is:
 - A “safety net” service for those whose disability prevents them from riding fixed-route service or traveling to/from bus stops
 - Offered to eligible individuals for travel within 3/4 mile of local bus routes or rail stations during the same times that fixed-route service operates
- The U.S. Department of Transportation ADA regulations establish the requirements for providing compliant complementary paratransit service
- The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) oversees METRA’s compliance

ADA Complementary Paratransit Eligibility

- To use ADA complementary paratransit, one must apply and qualify
- METRA reviews applications and grants or denies eligibility according to the ADA
 - This is based on an applicant's functional ability to travel to/from and/or ride METRA bus service, not their medical diagnosis
- The DOT ADA regulations (§ 37.125(a)) direct agencies like METRA to strictly limit eligibility to individuals who meet the regulatory criteria for eligibility.
 - Only those who meet the criteria may be determined as ADA paratransit eligible.
 - Agencies may provide paratransit service to others, but must adhere to the ADA requirements for ADA riders

Dial-A-Ride Paratransit Service Characteristics

- METRA's ADA paratransit service is called Dial-a-Ride
- Operates in response to demand (reservations required)
- Eligible riders may reserve next-day travel until 4:30 p.m. M-F or leave a voice message on Sundays
- Service hours are the same as METRA bus
 - When METRA buses runs, Dial-A-Ride is available
- Picks up and drops off riders anywhere within 3/4 mile of bus routes
- **Must operate without capacity constraints**

Prohibited Capacity Constraints

- Prohibited constraints include caps on the number of trips, trip request denials, use of waiting lists, or prioritization of trips by purpose
- Other prohibited constraints include:
 - Excessive telephone hold times for reservations for other calls
 - On-board travel times that exceed comparable bus trips
 - **Poor on-time performance**
 - **Vehicles arrive late and/or riders miss appointments**
- A “pattern or practice” is used to establish non-compliance
 - Example: METRA cannot have a practice of using wait lists or a pattern of poor on-time performance

What Leads to Poor On-Time Performance?

- Not enough working vehicles
- Not enough drivers
- Schedules that are too aggressive or unrealistic for actual travel conditions
- Insufficient road supervision
- Poor training
- Peak surges in demand
- Poor communications between operations staff and drivers

Providing Compliant Dial-A-Ride Means...

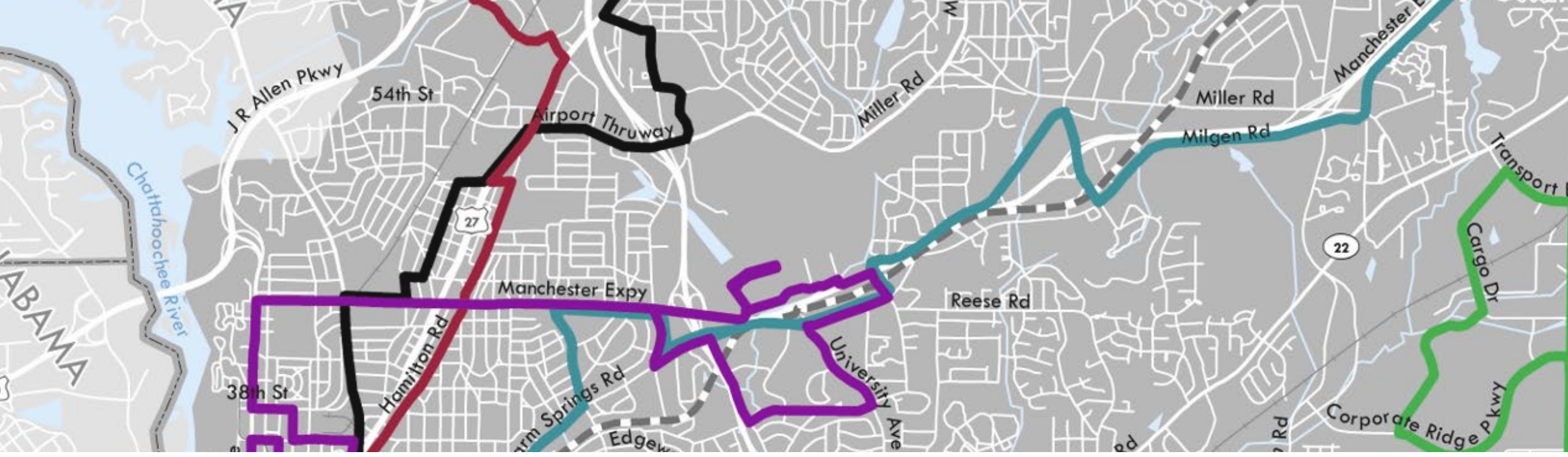
- Overseeing a proper eligibility process
- Honoring all next-day trip requests from eligible riders
- Minimizing telephone hold times
- Ensuring timeliness of pickups and drop-offs (for trips with appointments) within the ADA service area
- Monitoring and managing on-board travel times (when compared with fixed route)
- Training personnel appropriate to their duties
- Overseeing a complaint process with appropriate follow-up procedures



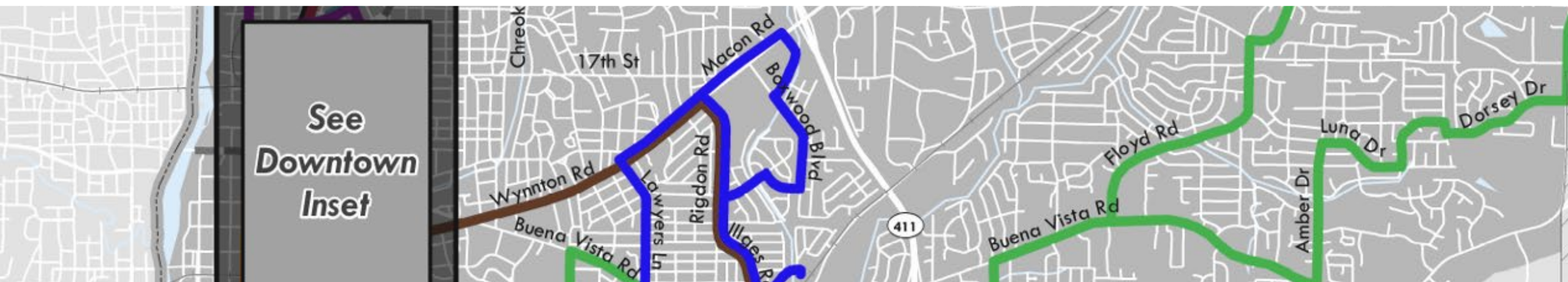
Study Scope and ADA Questions and Answers

Study Scope, Schedule, and ADA Paratransit

- Any comments or questions about the study, schedule, or ADA paratransit requirements?

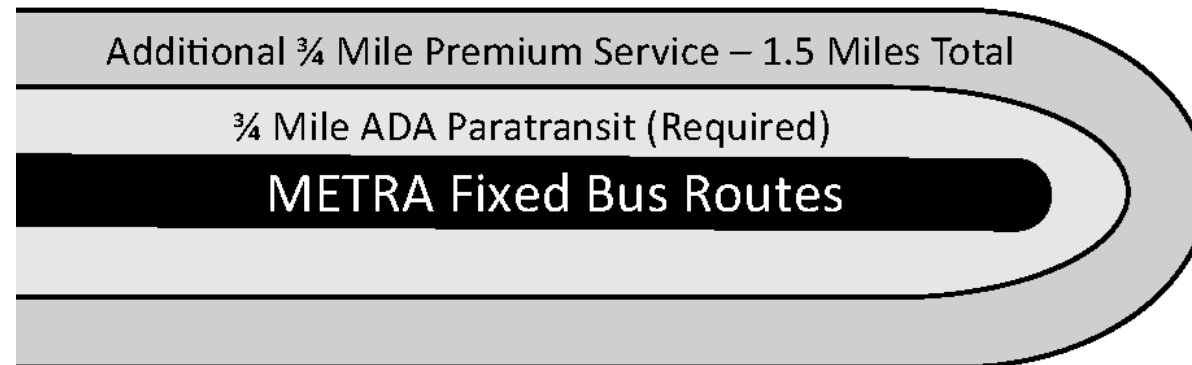


Service Area Expansion



Context

- In response to a citizen request, the Columbus Council recommended expanding the Dial-A-Ride service area from 3/4 mile (required) to 1.5 miles.
- Going beyond the requirement is permitted under ADA and is often named “premium service.”



Premium Service Considerations

- Federal Transit Administration (FTA) guidance on premium service notes:
 - Transit agencies are free to provide any level of additional service exceeding the requirements (premium service)
 - However, any service expansion beyond the 3/4-mile minimum **must not lead to lower service quality** for riders using the ADA-compliant complementary paratransit service

Premium Service Characteristics

- Transit agencies that offer premium service apply different service-delivery rules and policies
- Trip negotiations can exceed one hour before/after trip request time
 - ADA trips are limited to one hour before/after
- On-time performance standards are often lower than ADA
- On-board travel times are often longer than for ADA
- Fares are often higher
- Trips are typically prioritized by need (e.g., medical trips vs. recreation trips)
- Some trip requests are denied when ADA capacity is not available

Where is Premium Service Needed?

- As part of the study, the consultant team is looking to understand rider needs, including:
 - Current Dial-A-Ride Paratransit customers who wish to travel to/from locations beyond the 3/4-mile service boundary
 - Other riders with disabilities who wish to travel to/from locations outside of the current service area
 - Other riders without disabilities who have unmet travel needs

Where is Premium Service Needed?

- What are the locations not currently served by Dial-A-Ride Paratransit?
- What else would you like us to know as we conduct the study?

Thank you!



Bill Schwartz, AICP

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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
- 4 Public Input
- 5 Expanded (Premium) Service
- 6 Discussion and Next Steps
- 7 Demand-Response Service





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 22, 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



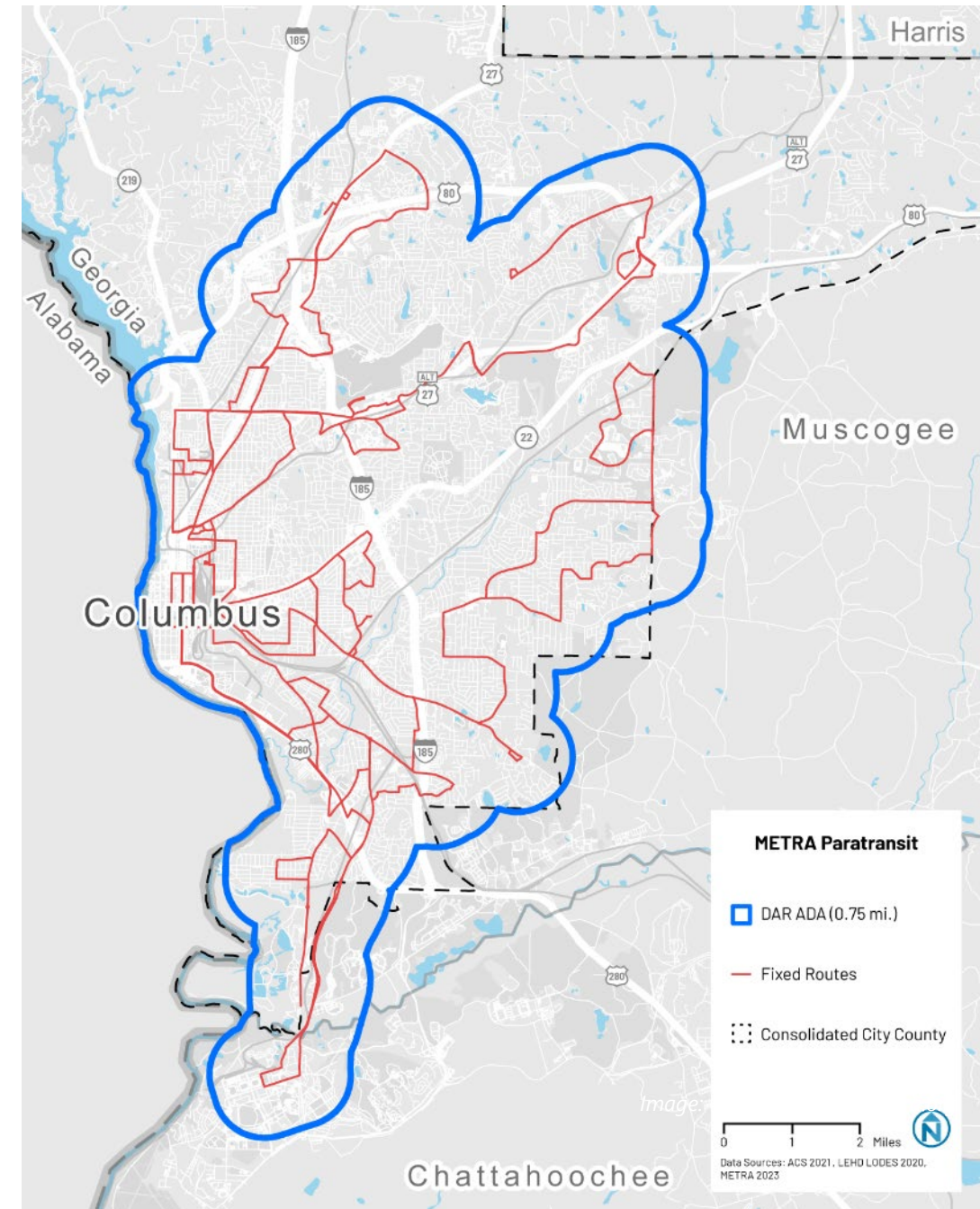
Demand Response and ADA

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 low-angle, close-up photograph 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, and a yellow ramp is extended to the ground. 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

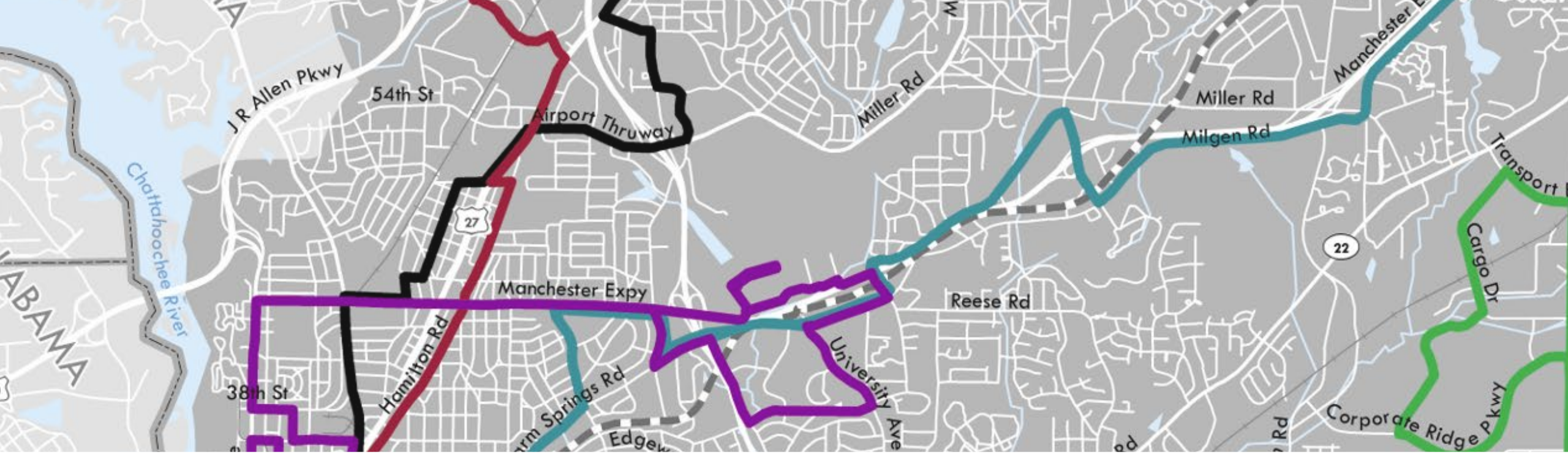
- Dial-A-Ride applications are growing
- **Staffing is not sufficient to accommodate increased demand even without service expansion**
- Better data are needed to track and report trends
- Keeping vehicle fleet longer will require more maintenance resources



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

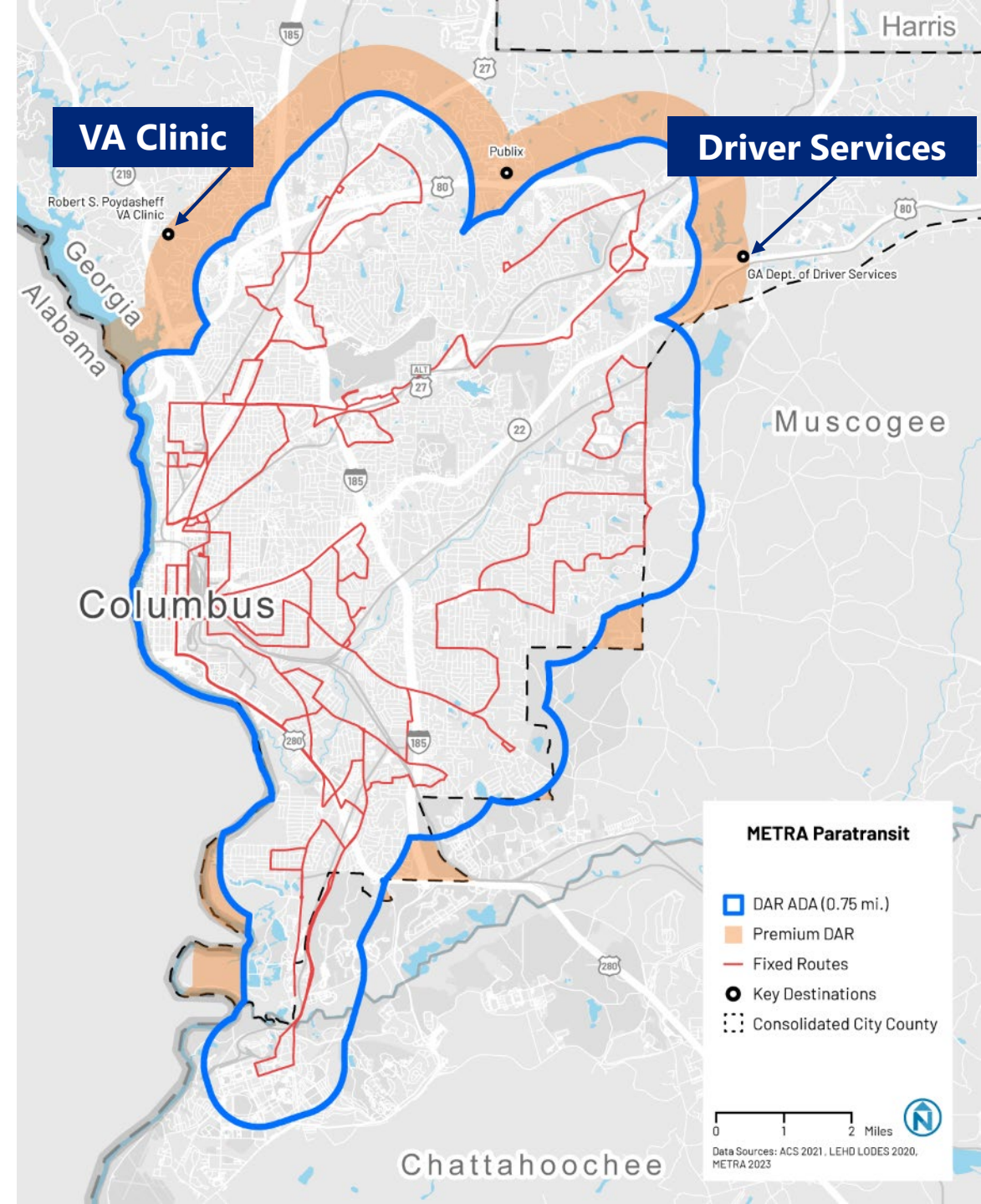


Regulatory Context

- 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 not 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.

A low-angle, close-up photograph of a person in a wheelchair. The person's right hand is on the large rear wheel, and their left hand is on the smaller front wheel. They are wearing a white tank top and black shoes. The wheelchair is being pushed up a yellow ramp that is extended from the open rear door of a white van. The van is parked on a paved surface. In the background, there are trees with yellow leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The sky is bright and clear. A dark blue banner with white text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

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

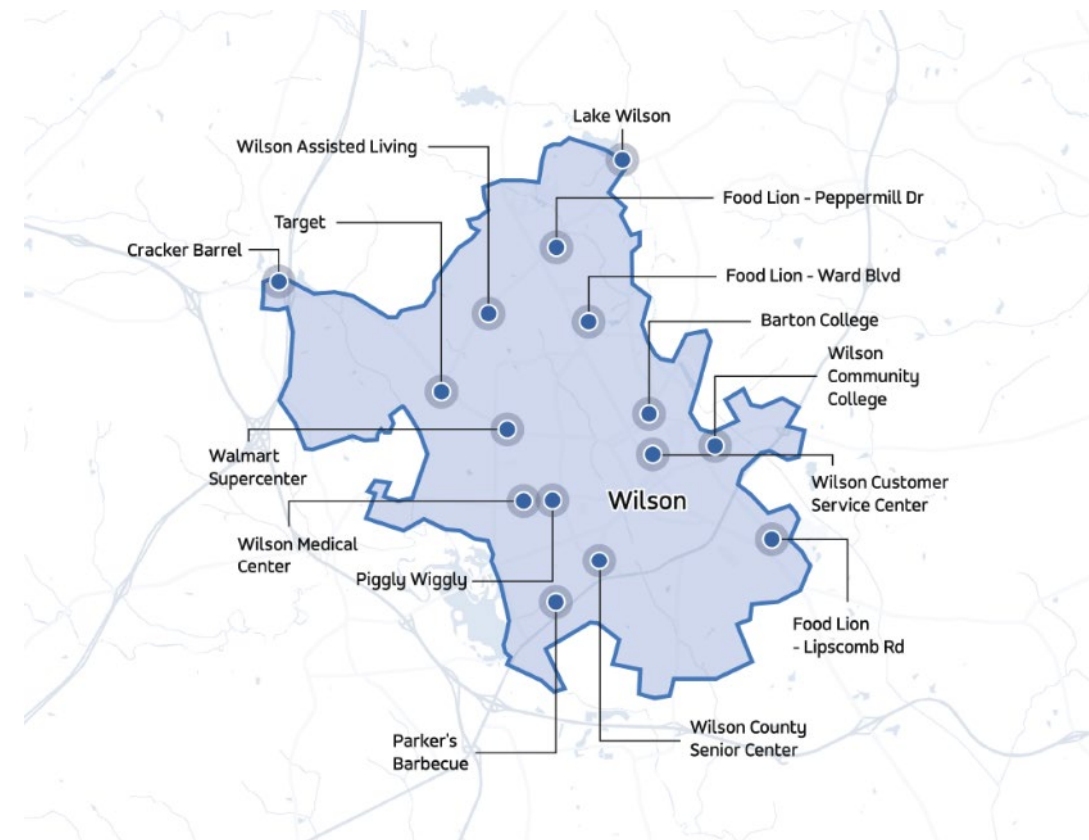
Fixed-Route Connection

- 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



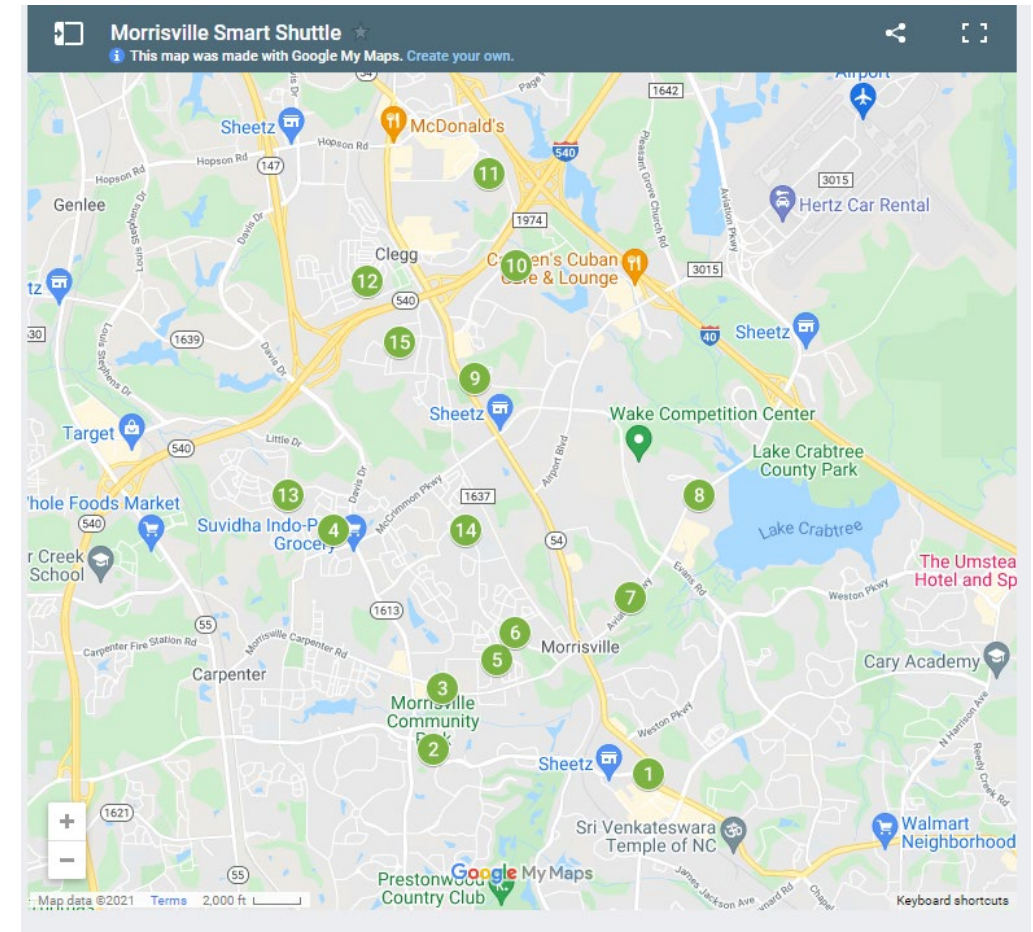
Replacement for Fixed-Route

- 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



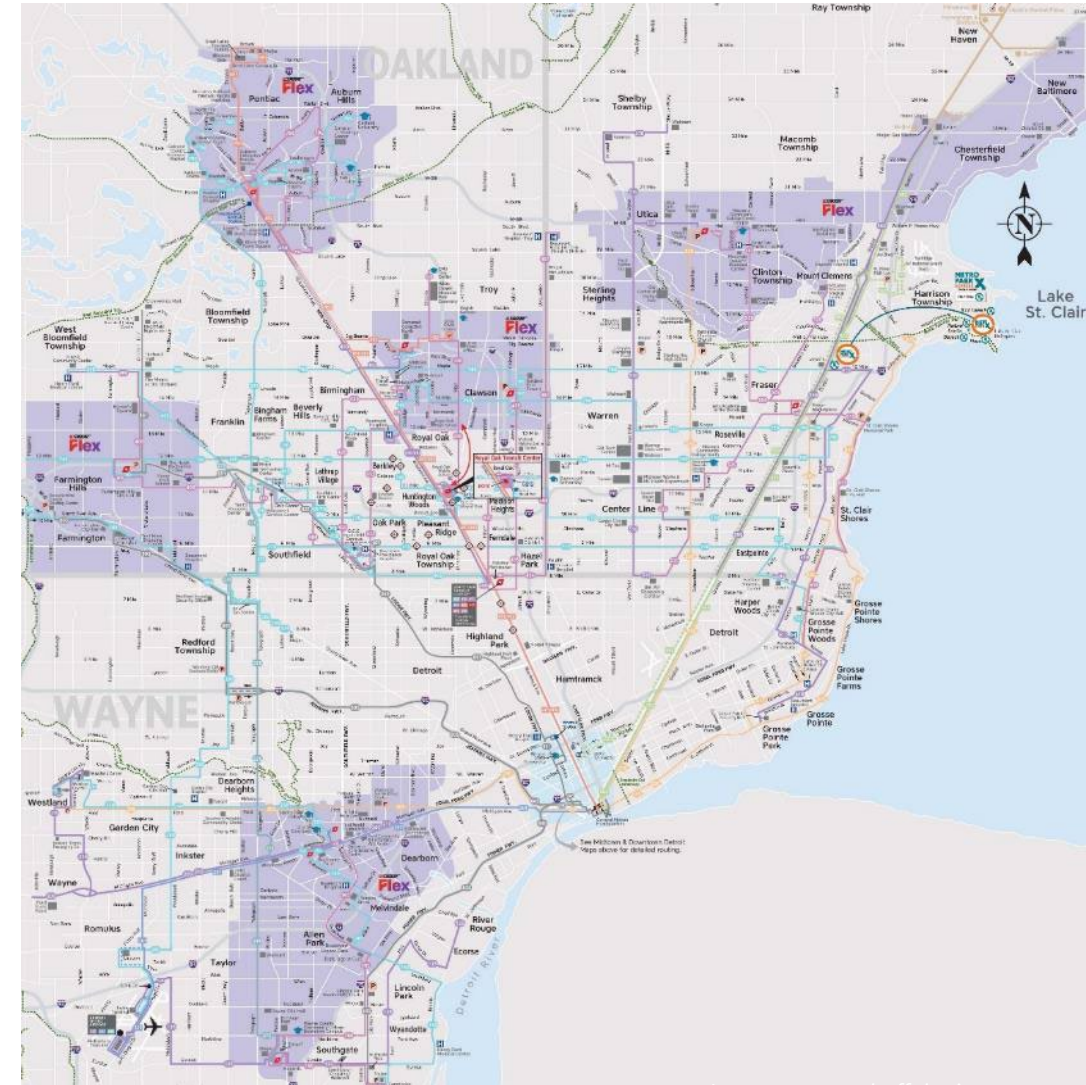
Node-Based Service

- 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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