

CITY COUNCIL CONFERENCE MINUTES

October 12, 2021

The City Council of the City of Norman, Cleveland County, State of Oklahoma, met in a conference at 5:30 p.m. in the Municipal Building Executive Conference room on the 12th day of October, 2021, and notice and agenda of the meeting were posted at the Municipal Building at 201 West Gray 24 hours prior to the beginning of the meeting.

PRESENT:	Councilmembers Foreman, Hall, Holman, Lynn, Peacock, Schueler, Studley, Tortorello, Mayor Clark
ABSENT:	None

Item 1, being:

DISCUSSING REGARDING THE CURRENT CITY OF NORMAN MASS TRANSIT SYSTEM AND ON-DEMAND MICROTRANSIT SERVICE PROGRAMS.

Mr. Shawn O’Leary, Director of Public Works, introduced Dr. Marilyn Dillon, Ph.D., Mobility Management Administrator/American with Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator for Embark. He said tonight’s discussion will include background and major milestones; existing City service overview; Regional Transportation Authority (RTA); Go Norman Transit Plan; microtransit/on-demand services; and next steps. He said Arlington, Texas, has a program known as VIA, which is a private company operating an on demand microtransit system. He said the City of Norman operates a mass transit system that moves a large number of people with large vehicles and microtransit moves a few number of people with small vehicles. He said microtransit is naturally more expensive, but is an on-demand service making it the Uber of transit.

In August 2018, the City was notified the University of Oklahoma (OU) wanted to transfer the transit system to the City of Norman; in February 2019, the RTA was officially formed; in July 2019, OU transferred the transit system to Norman and Norman partnered with EMBARK to operate the system fare free for fixed routes and paratransit service; in November 2019, voters approved a Public Transit Sales Tax; in July 2020, the Go Norman Study began; in November 2020, the groundbreaking for the new Transit/Public Safety Maintenance Building was held; and in June 2021, the Go Norman Plan was unanimously approved by City Council.

Mr. Taylor Johnson, Transit and Parking Program Manager, said the Norman transit system is fare free and operates on a fixed schedule, Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. The transit system services various destinations in Norman and has a fleet of 13 fixed route buses which carried 189,664 passengers in FYE 21. He highlighted the fixed routes that include Route 110 – Main Street; Route 111 – Lindsey Street East; Route 112- Lindsey Street West; Route 120 – West Norman Link; and Route 121 – Alameda Street/East Norman. He said two specialty routes include Route 024 – Norman/Sooner Express (operated by EMBARK in Oklahoma City and Route 144 – Social Security (operates on Tuesday and Friday afternoons when the Moore Social Security Office is open).

Mr. Johnson said the paratransit system is fare free as well and operates in two zones with Zone 1 (paratransit service required to provide 3/4 mile around fixed routes) being available Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and Saturday from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. and Zone 2 (service of 3/4 mile to City limits provided, but not required) operates Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. He said the paratransit system has a fleet of 15 buses, which carried 16,338 passengers in FYE 21. He said since the City accepts federal funds for the transit system, the City is required to provide a paratransit service for eligible individuals who are not functionally able to ride fixed route bus service due to a disabling condition. He said paratransit riders must submit an application and once approved they can schedule a trip one to seven days in advance. He said there are currently 563 active paratransit customers.

Mr. Johnson said FYE 22 expenses are anticipated to be \$7,108,252 (\$5,401,850 without fleet replacement) that includes EMBARK Interlocal Agreement - \$3,585,856; Fleet Maintenance, Fueling, Cleaning, Staff - \$1,568,992; Fleet Replacement - \$1,706,402; and other costs (Administrative Staff, annual fees/memberships, etc.) - \$247,002. He said FYE 22 revenues are anticipated to be \$7,108,252 (\$5,487,357 without fleet replacement) that includes Annual FTA Section 5307 Urbanized Formula Allocation/Grant - \$2,000,000; Public Transit Sales Tax - \$2,550,000; FTA Section 5339c Fleet Replacement Grant - \$639,969; Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ) Volkswagen Settlement Fleet Replacement Grant - \$450,000; Oklahoma Department of Transportation (ODOT) Public Transit Revolving Fund - \$134,285; Norman Regional Hospital - \$50,000; Bus Stop Advertising - \$12,000; and General Fund - \$1,271,998.

Mr. Johnson said a 20,000 square foot facility to house transit operations, maintenance activities, and maintenance of heavy duty public safety equipment is under construction on North Base at a cost of \$7,584,743.41. He said the facility construction is being funded by Federal Transit Authority (FTA) CARES Act Grant - \$5,057,371; Capital Fund - \$1,657,372.41; and Public Safety Sales Tax (PSST) - \$870,000. Substantial completion and move in is anticipated to be November 2021.

Currently, the City is utilizing OU's Brooks Street Transfer Station for operations, but is working to establish a City Transit Center in the downtown area because of existing infrastructure (sidewalks, bike lanes/paths, access to street grid for routes, etc.), improved access to major destinations, and continued momentum to create a more vibrant downtown. The budget for the Transit Station is anticipated to be \$1,234,900 that includes land acquisition - \$442,500 and construction/remodeling - \$792,700.

The RTA was officially formed in February 2019, that included six member cities – Del City; Edmond; Midwest City; Moore; Oklahoma City; and Norman. The Transit System Plan was approved in April 2021, and members are currently working on an Alternative Analysis that includes corridor planning, stations and Land Use, and concept development.

Staff has been working with Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates, Inc., (Nelson/Nygaard) for a comprehensive evaluation of the existing transit service to identify opportunities to improve transit service for the community. The study is a strategic plan to optimize and expand transit over the next 20 years. Outreach activities included promotion of the project website to citizens and stakeholders, public meetings, and promotion of an online survey to obtain feedback on existing transit service and suggestions for potential improvements.

The transit study began in July 2020, and included 1) Existing Conditions Analysis – routes, schedules, ridership, destinations, paratransit trips, demographics, employment and travel patterns; 2) Scenario Planning - consisted of community meetings and online surveys as well as discussions with bus drivers, mechanics, and stakeholders; and 3) Report Development – route changes, service expansion, transit center, bus stops, and new buses.

The Transit Study reviewed major destinations such as University of Oklahoma; Sooner Mall; University Town Center; Walmart Supercenter stores; Community Services Building; and Robinson Crossing shopping center. The study also reviewed existing routes as well as the transit market that includes families without a car, seniors who do not drive, employees without a car, students, low-wage employees; and commuters to and from Oklahoma City.

The Transit Study consisted of numerous public engagement activities that included online and on-board surveys, in-person and virtual community meetings, social media posts, utility bill inserts, project website, and posters on buses. A stakeholder group was established to solicit feedback and share information. The final report included operational and capital recommendations to the existing service and future expansion as well as existing conditions, fare analysis, transit support design toolkit, and outreach summary. The Go Norman Transit Plan was unanimously adopted by Council on June 22, 2021.

Summarized recommendations include: Update and Streamline the Route Network – realign bus routes to better serve the needs of existing and potential transit riders by improving access to key destinations and reducing travel time; Establish a Downtown Transit Center – relocate the local route transfer hub from the OU Campus to Downtown Norman to maximize efficiency and allow for future service expansion; Strategically Expand Bus Service – extend routes to serve emerging destinations, offer longer hours and more frequent service, and operate on Sundays; Upgrade and Standardize Fleet – replace aging vehicles and assemble a uniform fleet to minimize maintenance costs and pursue FTA grants for replacement buses; Continue to Operate Fare Free – avoid costly collection equipment on new buses and allow riders to adjust to route changes and the local economy to recover from the pandemic before re-evaluating the fare policy; and Promote Transit Supportive Land Use – make transit easier to access and encourage more sustainable development and maximize rider safety, comfort, and convenience.

On-demand or Microtransit services at its basic level is low-capacity, flexible public transit service that is privately or publicly operated, technology based, and uses vans or shuttle type vehicles. Microtransit is typically deployed to compliment traditional public transit in areas of low-density mobility, underperforming bus routes, or paratransit services. Microtransit has really started to evolve and become more popular in the last five years.

On-demand or Microtransit services generally have microtransit zones or offer citywide service. Some providers include VIA (operations, maintenance, and/or technology); Spare (technology); Moovit (technology); Routematch by Uber (technology); and RideCo (technology). Mr. Johnson said Arlington, Texas, is the only City offering citywide on-demand transit service while a few other cities offer microtransit zone services. He said Arlington is 99 square miles with a population of 398,864 in 2020 and their ridership from October 1, 2020, through September 25, 2021, was 179,814. The cost of operations is \$8,300,000 and they have a fare fee system as follows:

- Trips from 0 to 1.5 miles - \$3.00
- Trips from more than 1.5 to 3 miles - \$3.50
- Trips from more than 3.43 to 5 miles - \$4.00
- Trips from less than 4.5 to 6 miles - \$4.50
- Trips over 6 miles - \$5.00
- ViaPass - \$25.00 weekly pass that allows up to four trips per day

Norman has 189 square miles with a population of 125,762 and ridership of 206,002 from July 1, 2020, through June 30, 2021. Norman's transit service is fare free and cost of operations is \$6,231,850 (\$5,401,850 for operations/maintenance/administrative costs, etc., \$600,000 for one bus replacement, and \$230,000 for two paratransit vehicle replacements).

Mr. Johnson highlighted testimonials from a few cities that have on-demand or microtransit service. Tulsa Transit stated, "It is a fallacy to think on-demand is more cost effective than fixed route. Our vision is to focus on key fixed routes and use microtransit for first and last mile service." Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) stated, "Dallas is currently operating 17 microtransit zones and there will be an expansion to 30 zones in 2022 with some of the zones replacing fixed route services as recommended in their DARTzoom Plan." Denton County Transportation Authority (DCTA) stated, "We began on-demand service on September 7, 2021, alongside the fixed route service to observe ridership trends. Originally planned to discontinue all non-university routes on December 6, 2021; however, it will depend on the analysis of ridership and feedback." A Big 12 University City stated, "We would not go 100% on-demand because it is not cost effective. A fixed route bus in a high density area gets far more productivity than a 15 passenger vehicle. Our microtransit program is only suitable for areas where fixed routes cannot go or there is not enough density to sustain it."

The City of Norman initially considered microtransit service for northwest or southeast Norman that are underserved areas, but decided not to pursue this as it was showing to result in a large increase to the transit program budget. In the Go Norman Transit Plan planning horizon, approximately 10 years, it was identified that there are greater needs particularly with frequency in areas already served by fixed route service. Existing fixed routes carried ten to 40 riders per service hour pre-pandemic and six to 17 riders per service hour in FYE 21 with limited capacity restrictions. Existing paratransit service carried 1.5 riders per service hour pre-pandemic and per service hour in FYE 21. On-demand/microtransit typical carries three to four riders per service hour when used as a fixed route replacement.

Mr. Johnson said Staff is seeking Council's input on an EMBARK Norman Plus On-demand Service Pilot Project by leveraging the City's existing partnership with EMBARK. Services of Routematch, the City's existing paratransit software provider, can be utilized. Estimated cost increases include operations/maintenance/and fuel - \$571,830 that assumes level demand for service to switch to on-demand; however, demand for the service could increase. In addition, if the service remains free, costs could double to \$1,143,660. This pilot project assumes no trip will be longer than ten miles and fully loaded trip cost uses a standard cost per revenue hour (\$70) and assumes that two trips can be completed per hour. Routematch would cost an additional \$127,440 for the first two years and \$43,360 per year after that. There would be one-time capital cost of \$230,000 to \$345,000 for two to three paratransit vehicles to handle the on-demand service.

Next steps include continuing to explore and implement the immediate/short-term Go Norman Transit Plan recommendations to design and build a Downtown Transit Center, creating new bus stops to serve recommended route network, and implementing recommended route network.

If Council directs pursuing implementation of on-demand paratransit pilot program, Staff recommends a mid-fiscal year 2023 start date of January 2023. Mr. Johnson said Staff would need to create the pilot program and policies, zones of operation, fare or no fare, marketing, etc., as well as finalize costs and submit for EMBARK's annual operating contract for FYE 2023. He said finalized costs will include an increased cost for EMBARK's annual operating contract for FYE 2023; increased costs for City of Norman maintenance and fuel for FYE 2023; increased costs of technology service provided by Routematch in FYE 2023; and procurement of two to three paratransit vehicles (if funding could be realized in FYE 2022, that would be ideal due to delay in vehicle production).

Councilmembers were very interested in a pilot program because having to schedule rides 24 hours in advance can be a burden to citizens, particularly those with disabilities, that may need immediate rides for any number of reasons. Councilmembers suggested reaching out to Cleveland County to see if they would be interested in helping fund an on-demand program since many areas in Cleveland County, such as Little Axe, have no bus service at this time.

Items submitted for the record

1. PowerPoint presentation entitled, "City of Norman Transit (Mass Transit and Microtransit)," dated October 12, 2021

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The meeting was adjourned at 6:30 p.m.

ATTEST:

City Clerk

Mayor