



**Missoula Urban Transportation District
Planning Committee Meeting Minutes
July 10, 2024**

APPROVED

MEMBERS PRESENT

Sebastian Strauss
Jason Wiener
Amy Cilimburg
Don MacArthur

MEMBERS ABSENT

Sam Oliver

STAFF

Jen Sweten
Colin Woodrow
Garin Wally
Frank Kuhl
Spencer Starke
Olga Kreimer

Guests

Kyle Taniguchi, Nelson\Nygaard
Thomas Whittman, Nelson\Nygaard
Aaron Wilson, Missoula Metropolitan Organization (MPO)

Call to Order and Roll Call

11:07 a.m. – Cilimburg called the meeting to order and asked for roll call. Starke introduced the guests from Nelson\Nygaard.

Changes or Additions to the Agenda

No changes or additions to the agenda.

Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda

None

Action Items

4.1 Minutes of May 8, 2024, Meeting – Strauss motioned to approve the minutes, Cilimburg seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Discussion Items

5.1 Strategic Plan Update – Starke explained that the strategic planning committee had produced some preliminary findings, and the staff is asking for board guidance in navigating key exchanges for service delivery and approaches that haven't yet been contemplated. Starke said the previous plan had been established around a grow inward theme which is still a central tenet while focusing on frequency, coverage, climate, equity and housing. While there is greater coverage throughout the community, there is still a conflict between frequency and distance. MUTD is a transit network that continually reviews development and developing locations.

Three of the previous strategic plan's four phases have been implemented focusing on service expansion to longer Saturday service and adding Sundays. The remaining phase – implementing Route 15 to accommodate growth on the west side of Reserve – has yet to be launched.

The strategic planning teams (MUTD and MPO) are expecting an updated existing condition report within the next month describing how the community has shifted over time. Transit performance was a large portion of the preliminary draft. The resulting comprehensive document will also include a summary of the pertinent information to share with the public.

Post-COVID ridership continues to increase based on the twenty percent increase in revenue hours that translates into more service but also equals higher costs. Operating and maintenance expenses have increased, as have labor costs. Supply chain disruptions have also impacted transit systems nationwide. Whittman added that the drop in historical numbers is a positive sign other agencies haven't experienced. Starke said MUTD attributed the decrease to retaining operators to fill out the expanded schedules. Wiener said determining a true operating cost number that includes all the agency's expenses required more thorough investigation.

Starke said a stop level assessment revealed that ridership in total is down in some locations but has risen in others. Sweten said because ridership has expanded in East Missoula and out toward the airport, frequency was increased during the last service expansion. Strauss asked if there was a way to determine how much ridership changed due to expanded frequency. Starke said it could be accomplished by factoring the existing data into the stop level ridership calculations.

Starke reviewed a performance comparison of routes sorted by ridership that were operating well and routes that needed performance adjustments. When compared to other transit systems, MUTD is realizing more riders as a percentage than what it is investing in revenue hours. The two most productive routes make up 46 percent of the ridership and comprise 36 percent of the revenue hours. One route has a positive relationship between percent ridership and percent revenue hours while other routes are the costliest per trip or experience low ridership per revenue hour.

11:38 – MacArthur joined the meeting.

Starke stated that Routes 1 and 2 are the highest frequency routes with the best performing ridership. Route 4 is second, and Route 6 follows in third place. Routes 9, 5 and 12 are the lowest performing routes in the system. Cilimburg asked if the variations between routes were common. Whittman replied the challenge to continue service in lower density areas leads to a tradeoff between coverage and ridership. Sweten emphasized that frequency drives ridership, not coverage. Strauss wanted to know how other transit systems compare with the ratio between the highest and lowest performing routes. Starke said the deployed services are appropriate for the areas they serve. Strauss observed that frequency and reliability can offset inefficiency in wait times. Taniguchi said that over twenty passengers per hour for an agency the size of MUTD is good. The rule of thumb is less than ten riders per hour may dictate an alternative service such as on demand. Fifteen to 20 riders per hour is a solid standard.

Cilimburg asked if the figures would be accurate for 2023 and if there were any obvious system changes through the first half of 2024. Starke responded that 2023 showed similar patterns to the 2022 data. Sweten said 2024 ridership numbers show a 32 percent increase over last year, totaling just under 1.3 million riders for fixed route. Adding in paratransit takes that figure to 1.3 million.

Starke said space constraints at the existing base facility impose limitations on fixed route service expansion. He added that some of MUTD's routes overlap with the University of Montana's (UM) transit network. MUTD's goal does not always mesh with how UM implements its service. In addition, MUTD is pursuing several projects that will constrain the next few operating years. The staff would like direction from the board on where it could make some gains.

The overlap with the UM buses causes a highly inefficient utilization where integration and coordination to maximize utility may be required. Also, though UDASH is available to the public, it is not widely known enough to utilize it as a supplemental service to MUTD. UDASH's fiscal constraints may represent an opportunity to pick up those routes. MacArthur asked how much UM would pay MUTD to make the service viable. Starke responded that UDASH would still operate its own reconfigured route service that would be redistributed to minimize overlap. MacArthur asked if a service agreement with UM would make sense. Woodrow said the student fees used to run UDASH would not be enough to replace the costs of contracting for services with MUTD. UDASH's own strategic plan will be released in the fall. The UDASH buses are low performing and require constant charging, but the system will probably be limited to a campus circulator and a smaller, more diverse fleet. UM also has capital constraints for building its own facility.

Strauss asked if UDASH riders would transfer to MUTD. Starke said there could be some reduction, but UDASH serves areas MUTD does not. Anticipated changes to UDASH's service would mitigate the overlap conflicts while still providing service in areas MUTD does not travel. On-demand feasibility, fixed-route changes and the UDASH service changes are three areas where cost-constrained scenarios should be considered in the short-term planning.

The question is whether mobility can be improved in specific areas at a lower or the same cost. Nelson\Nygaard identified two feasible areas as Target Range and Lower Miller Creek where the performance to cost ratios are low. Compared to other areas, Lower Miller Creek will not experience large density increases so service at cost or a little bit lower could be provided. On-demand transit is not as efficient for this area because the net capacity for ride sharing is lower.

Starke said demographic changes west of Reserve represent transit-supported densities. East Missoula will also undergo transportation changes based on the MPO funding for Highway 200 improvements. Strauss asked what the cost per ride per zone is. Starke replied it depends on the service span and the number of deployed vehicles. Whittman stated that on demand in the Target Range or Miller Creek areas will not sustain the requisite six passengers per hour standard. Providing flexible access can reduce the cost per trip but can be offset by redeploying the bigger buses. Strauss observed that fixed route versus on demand is not a straightforward comparison because it does not include bus amortization costs. He requested to see an overlay map depicting the tax district showing areas where MUTD does not get any revenue. He also wants to see prioritized areas for service expansion.

Woodrow layering in capital costs would be difficult but he and his team will attempt to summarize the data. MacArthur observed that the revenue stream indicated a need for service expansion. Taniguchi said the challenge is whether on demand should be a substitute service or a supplementary service. MacArthur said on demand is not suitable for a commuter but implementing on demand as a supplementary service or a pilot program to increase reach could be a solution. Cilimburg asked if there was a difference between on-demand vehicles and the funds for buses MUTD receives from federal funding. Sweten confirmed the funding is an 80/20 split match.

Starke said the options for increasing ridership in the short term require changes based on frequency connecting people to the town. Whittman said it is not accurate to look at a total on a route level but at ridership in outlying areas that does not support fixed route. MacArthur asked where the service shift should be. Whittman replied that the opportunity is in the developing outlying areas.

12:20 – Strauss left the meeting.

MacArthur asked how MUTD can improve livability for those who need the most support. He asked to see calculations on whether the on-demand service merits further investigation. Whittman related suggestions for other routes that could be changed to serve more riders.

Starke said micro mobility service partnerships and serving Lolo and the Wye areas have also been discussed. Other issues include regional transportation service, the new facility, the bus rapid transit system and the southern transfer center. Frequency is the key to a navigable system. Ridership is still recovering because many fixed routes are one seat rides. He emphasized that MUTD operates a very good system, has grown that system and will continue to grow.

Cilimburg asked Whittman and Taniguchi what priorities the board should consider as the strategic planning process progressed. Sweten said the resources indicated MUTD could offer alternative services, not fewer services. Kreimer said the perception of service shifting is going to be paramount because there's more than one way to tell those stories.

Cilimburg asked Wilson about the MPO's goal to minimize commute times. Wilson responded that the goals are driven by ridership, not coverage. Inflation for infrastructure is outpacing inflation for other things. Keeping affordable housing, reducing parking and providing good transit services need to fit together. MacArthur said the additional generated funds should be used to create equitable solutions.

12:59 – MacArthur left the meeting.

Wiener requested that a discussion on how bus service interacts with vehicle miles travels and trip on other modes be included in the report. Cilimburg observed that on demand could include bicycles.

Adjournment

1:01 p.m. – Cilimburg adjourned the meeting.

Submitted by Darlene Craven