



Town of Sudbury

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Sudbury Transportation Committee

Minutes

Thursday, September 7, 2023

10:00 AM

Via Town Zoom Conference Call

Core Members Present: Daniel Carty, Alice Sapienza, Debra Galloway, Bob Lieberman, and Bessie Struck

Advisory Group Present: None

Advisory Group Absent: Martha Welsh, Scott Nix, Carmine Gentile, Bethany Hadvab, Silvia Nersessian, Mary Warzynski

Guests: Jake Bortz, Maddie Pena, both from *Via Transportation*, Kay Bell

Confirmation of Quorum: The statutory requirements as to notice having been complied with, Dan Carty as Chair convened the meeting at 9:01 AM. Dan Carty made an announcement that this was a public meeting, and the meeting was being broadcast live via Zoom and recorded by Sudbury TV. He took roll call, noted a quorum was present, and announced that he was making Debra co-host of the Zoom session.

Selection of Clerk: Debra volunteered to take meeting minutes.

New Transportation Committee Member:

Dan introduced Elizabeth “Bessie” Struck, who is the new Commission on Disability liaison to the Transportation Committee. Bessie reported that she has a background in mental health and worked many years at a community non-profit supporting people with disabilities. Bessie also lives with her own disability and supports her son who is autistic. Bessie indicated that she is happy to be on the Committee and accordingly the Committee members welcomed Bessie.

Dan also welcomed Kay Bell, a Sudbury resident, as a guest.

Via Transportation Presentation:

Dan suggested that the Committee allow the staff from *Via Transportation* to share their presentation at the beginning of the meeting for their convenience.

Maddie Pena is on the *Via Partnership* team and works with local *Via* staff in the U.S. and Canada. Jake Bortz works closely with partners in MA and on the East Coast. Jake shared his screen and proceeded through a presentation.

Background: Via has been in operation for over a decade, has 650 partners, in 40 countries on all continents, except Antarctica. They have a large presence in the Northeast, and headquarters in New York City. They have 40 partners and 250 staff in the Northeast.

Via helps to fill gaps in public transportation, and helps people (older, those living with disabilities, and others) to live a full life, and get where they need to go. They provide microtransit, which is flexible and accessible. They work with many entities, including cities, towns, and universities, providing shuttles, first-mile/last-mile (FMLM) service as well as microtransit. Via works to reduce single occupancy vehicles, mitigating congestion, and connecting people to rail and MBTA.

Via's microtransit software allows them to provide efficient service. They strive to schedule more than one person per vehicle. They have a mobile and web app, and also have call center capabilities for those who cannot use apps.

Via employs trained drivers with 5 years of professional driving experience. Drivers assist riders in and out of vehicles, and help with groceries, when needed. Customer service is an important focus, and they offer riders multiple pay options.

Via has two partnership models: 1) software that assists transportation providers in aggregating rides and using the most efficient routing for their rides; or 2) turnkey operation – a complete transportation service system (most MA partnerships are this type). Turnkey operation offers rider and partner support, call center access for riders, mobile and web apps, vehicles based on customer needs, the appropriate number of wheelchair-accessible vehicles (WAV), as well as trained drivers who have received background checks. With the turnkey option, Via provides day to day operation and dispatch analysis. Via strives to provide accessible and equitable service.

Via has multi-lingual apps available if needed. They are also able to allow riders who are unbanked, to use cash, via vouchers or promo codes.

Via has an extensive driver pool and would be ready to start service in Sudbury. They doubled driver supply in the last year.

Bessie commented that the Via service sounds very exciting. Coming from a community service background, she is aware that there are residents who have transportation needs that could benefit from such a service. People with disabilities and others need transportation not only for more urgent needs, like medical appointments, but also for social activities. People with disabilities deserve to have some fun and leisure.

Alice asked how does Via have such success with finding drivers?

Jake stated that Via offers incentives for drivers and has effective marketing as well. Drivers do not need a Commercial Driver's license (CDL) because most vehicles are sedans, and they offer flexible work hours. Drivers are paid for their shifts whether they have a rider or not. Most Via drivers in MA are independent contractors.

Bob asked about eligibility for the service and cost of the program. Jake indicated that eligibility for the service is up to the partner. Some partners provide service to those who are 60+ and people who have disabilities. Others may also provide service to people with lower incomes. Most Via partners in Massachusetts provide service to the general public.

Riders may pay different rates depending on income level or if they are older adults or people living with disabilities.

As for funding, Jake reported that some programs are completely funded through the city or agency, some are funded through grants, and most are a mix of funding sources.

Jake noted that Via focuses on efficiency as that drives the cost per ride. What's interesting about Via's model is that they are committed to matching the number of vehicles on the road to the demand for rides. Jake pointed to a graph showing the correlation of the number of rides vs. number of van hours in the Arlington, Texas, Via program. Via also tries to aggregate riders so that vehicles are not going out of their way for pickups, leading to greater efficiency and the lowest cost per ride in the industry.

Jake shared information on the HRT program in Virginia, which is a 100-vehicle service, in which Via provides both paratransit and microtransit services. Additionally, Via provides the full service in Newton. For the Newton MA program, over time, there was demand for a separate service for seniors, that offered both pre-booking and on-demand.

Via offers a lot of marketing support, including community engagement, visiting the Senior Center, town hall, creating attractive visuals and graphics to help people learn about and how to use the service. The partner chooses the brand and has as much input as they'd like to.

Jake reported on some Via services being provided in Massachusetts. The Salem Skipper service is set to expand to the towns of Danvers and Beverly. Via assisted Salem in applying for \$2.3 million of earmark funding. The current service provides a lot of FMLM service to commuter rail and subway stations. Salem does have a population of lower income residents who do not have cars.

The Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) has a successful Via service in Westborough that is expanding to Shrewsbury. The current service is high use with an average of 4 passengers per hour. Typical trips are to commuter rail, schools, stores, etc. This is an on-demand service.

Another case study shared by Jake was the Via service in Wilson, North Carolina, with a population of 40,000 people. They had an old fixed-route system that did not have much ridership. They switched to all on-demand and covered the entire city with the same budget as the fixed route system.

Valdosta, Georgia, was considered a transit desert (like Sudbury). Valdosta service now has 7 vehicles, 30% are pre-booked, 70% are on demand trips (45,000 trips/year).

Alice commented that Sudbury is considered a transit desert, but has a smaller population, so has been looking to collaborate with surrounding towns to provide a larger volume of rides. Alice also noted that Massachusetts is a home-rule state, meaning that laws and regulations can vary by town

(including differences in required liability insurance requirements). This can make collaboration between towns more complicated. Jake reported that the expansion from Salem to Danvers and Beverly did involve some discussions with decision makers, but they were able to come to agreement.

Dan asked about the map of New England that Jake showed earlier. The map indicates Via is working on the Cape as well as in Vermont. Jake reported that the Green Mountain Transit service is in Montpelier. Montpelier had underperforming fixed routes, replaced with on-demand and pre-booked rides that integrate with the fixed route and rail schedules. Service is provided mainly in town, including non-urgent medical, and intermodal, as well as to certain destinations outside of town. University students use the service and there is interest in expansion to surrounding towns. Jake believes that this service is federally funded. Via provides the software that organizes dispatch of the rides.

Another feature of the Via app is that it can tell riders when the next commuter train is coming and what time the microtransit can be there to get them to the train on time.

Jake said, for example, if the total Via fleet for Sudbury is 3 vehicles, the demand may only be for one vehicle most of the time.

For Sudbury, people may want a lot of service within town but also some points of interest outside of town. For example, Sudbury may want to have transportation to the commuter rail stations in the area. Jake showed a potential Sudbury service using Via, that would include 3-4 vehicles and 1 WAV. This is a rough sketch to just get an idea of what it might look like. Some destinations might include Emerson Hospital, West Concord rail station, etc. Via also provides a spare vehicle in case of breakdowns, and all vehicles will be branded and ready to use.

Alice asked if Jake could talk informally about the Newton service and how it evolved?

Newton's Via service started with seniors only and state and federal funding. It was successful and then expanded to all residents, due to interest. Newton also utilized grants to support the service. Over time, Newton brought back some dedicated service times for seniors to ensure they were able to get rides when needed.

Alice wondered who are Via's competitors for the turnkey operation? Jake stated that there are not many competitors. Some competitors have the software, but not the vehicles and service. Some towns use software and taxis, but that usually does not offer WAV service.

Jake noted one competitor is Freebie – but this is a warm weather service, in open air vehicles, that are like golf carts. There are more competitors who have software to assist with dispatching and route scheduling.

Jake indicated that Via is making strides to have a more electrified fleet and to assist with increasing the charging infrastructure. There are some fully electric and/or hybrid fleets, though electric and hybrid WAV are still in short supply.

Vehicles are stored in partner parking lots, such as Home Depot, or others in the area. The WRTA service has a location to park vehicles in Westborough.

Alice noted that Newton's branded vehicles brought a lot of attention and helped to spur growth of the system. This would be important in the Sudbury area, as there would be more challenge to publicize the service in this less dense area. Jake agreed and promised that Via would also help with a lot of community engagement activities, social media, pamphlets, posters, and more, in terms of publicity.

Dan questioned what would be a rough estimate of cost for a service that included 3-4 vehicles?

Jake guessed that the cost might be \$700,000 per year due to the higher cost of drivers in the Massachusetts area. Alice asked about the per ride cost – Jake reported per ride cost might be \$13-\$15. Newton was an early partner with Via and a part of a long-term contract so they have a lower cost. Newer partners, such as King County Metro will have a per ride cost closer to \$15/ride. The hourly cost is estimated to be \$70-\$80/hour.

Dan thanked Jake and Maddie for attending the meeting and for the presentation.

Action Items:

Dan reviewed the action Items from the last meeting on August 18:

- MAGIC funds – Planning office is in process of sending out an invoice regarding these funds that are from the MAGIC \$10,000 awarded to the Community Compact initiative several years earlier.
- Review of survey results – tabled until next meeting.
- Outreach to Via – accomplished today.
- Dani Marini-King – new advisory member to Transportation Committee from Sustainable Sudbury – Dan reported that this appointment is on the Select Board Consent Calendar.
- State earmark – The earmark of \$125,000 may need to be spent during this fiscal year. Dan is hoping to find out that there are caveats to this guideline. The money has not been received by the town yet, and we are already a couple of months into the fiscal year.
- Publicity on the change to 10 taxi rides per month – this information was shared with Leila who publicized it on the website; Ana Cristina emailed all registered taxi users about the change. Debra ensured that CrossTown Connect dispatch knows about the change as well.
- Financial update – the only new data since our last meeting is one ride in July by Annex Transit for \$139.07; there will be a full update at the next meeting.

Community news –

Dan shared that there will be a Community Forum on Thursday, October 12 at 7:00 PM at Town Hall. The theme is "Residents Shaping Sudbury's Future". There will be a meet and greet with Committees, presentations, information on Annual Town Meeting. Not everyone on the Committee received the email about the Forum – Dan will follow up on this.

There will be a Fall Fest at Haskell Field on Saturday, September 23, from 12:00-5:00 PM.

Dan will find out if there will be a need to post a meeting because there may be a quorum of the Transportation Committee attending either of the above events.

Bessie shared that she lives in subsidized housing. She knows a lot of folks who work full-time, have kids, and do not have money for car repairs. She wants to advocate for the people who live there and was thinking of them while listening to the Via presentation. It would be great if this service could be not only for older adults and those who have a disability, but also for those who are financially vulnerable. Dan noted that the current GoSudbury programs are available to those who are financially vulnerable, along with residents who are older adults, or residents who live with a disability that limits driving and veterans. Dan offered to meet with Bessie to talk about the history of the Transportation Committee and the services provided. Alice added that these communities are on our radar and the Committee continues to advocate for services to all of the above listed groups of people in town.

Alice asked a question about having a Quorum on a Call – it will be important to confirm whether three Committee members can be on a Zoom call without posting a meeting to comply with Open Meeting Law. Alice reported that Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC) has scheduled an informal call with representatives from Salem and Newton to talk about their transportation programs. We want to listen to their experiences with Via to learn whether Via might be a good partner for Sudbury in terms of our GoSudbury Uber program or otherwise. Salem uses Via, in part, to reduce single-occupancy vehicles (SOV) to reduce congestion. What has been Newton’s experience with Via? What do they like or not like? This meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, October 11.

Dan noted that because we are a Committee of 5, 3 people at a meeting is considered a quorum. This might mean the meeting needs to be posted as a public meeting and have minutes taken, etc.

Alice wanted to the Committee to know that she and Debra are working on the Community Connections grant preparations and will be meeting with Wayland and Weston representatives to discuss opportunities to work with the MWRTA on a possible Boston Hospital shuttle. She thanked Debra for all her work engaging staff in these towns.

Email Communication:

There have been a few recent emails to the Transportation Committee from community members. Dan noted that as Chair, he will answer any emails from the community to the Transportation Committee.

Minutes:

The minutes of August 18 were reviewed. Alice moved to approve with recommendations noted; Dan seconded the move; approval on roll call was unanimous.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting is scheduled for Friday, September 22, at 10:30 AM.

Follow-up for Dan:

- Uber data
- Meeting with Bessie
- State earmark

- Town Forum/Fall Fest – Need to post as a meeting?

TMA: Alice reminded the Committee that we talked about having a focused discussion on the use of/benefit from a transportation management association (TMA) at a future meeting. Since Cross-Town Connect is no longer operating as a TMA (except for dispatch), we need to consider if a TMA will be useful in the future.

Adjournment:

Bob moved to adjourn the meeting, Debra seconded, approval on roll call was unanimous. The meeting was adjourned at 10:28 AM.