

Appendix A: Red Apple Transit Driver Interviews





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MEMORANDUM

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To: Joe Delmagori and Martin Lucero, Farmington MPO
Rod Hunt, City of Farmington

From: David Krutsinger, AICP

Subject: Red Apple Transit – Driver Interviews

Overview

At the request of the Farmington City Council and through Farmington MPO management direction, LSC conducted driver interviews on December 27 and 28, 2010. These interviews occurred during a time of transition between end-of-year holidays, and between management companies who operate Red Apple Transit on behalf of the City of Farmington. Presbyterian Medical Services (PMS) was the outgoing management company and First Transit the incoming management company.

Driver interviews served multiple purposes:

- Input to the study for which LSC was contracted concerning long-term operating planning and route structures,
- Input to Farmington City Council on oversight of bus transit services, with LSC as an independent third party uninvolved in the contract for operations, and
- Input to City of Farmington and Farmington MPO staff on day-to-day management of bus drivers and the operation of bus transit services.

Methodology

The interviews consisted of questions asking what positive aspects of Red Apple Transit should be retained, and what areas there were for improvement. Open-ended questions were asked on the following topic areas:

- Current routes and services
- Proposed future services (if known)
- City management of operations
- Contractor management of operations

The interviews were conducted by phone, with a toll-free number provided by LSC to PMS. PMS staff provided the phone number and made the request of drivers to contact LSC at break times or as otherwise available. LSC noted that the interviews were anonymous and that they would be summarized as a group, assuring individual confidentiality.

Four drivers called in to LSC offices on Monday, December 27 and Tuesday, December 28. Two of the drivers were women and two were men, giving an equal gender representation in the response. The four interviews represent approximately one-quarter of all drivers. Comments may not reflect the opinion of the majority of drivers. There are a reported 15 to 17 drivers at any given time throughout the year. Driver comments are reported as stated by the drivers. The interview process did not include efforts to field-check or otherwise validate comments made by the drivers.

Comments about Current Routes and Services

- General Comments
 - Dislike/disagree with policy requiring drivers to stop at every posted bus stop even when there are no passengers at that stop.
 - Most routes do not have enough locations for drivers to take bathroom breaks.
 - Driver “breaks” are scheduled at Orchard Plaza, but often cannot be done in practice. Drivers are not allowed to pull the bus to an out-of-service location. If the driver stays with the bus at Orchard Plaza, then customers are still asking informational questions and/or are requesting to get on the bus to get out of the weather.
 - Dislike stops that are in parking lots of businesses. It is more dangerous than an on-street bus stop due to the more free-moving behavior of both cars and pedestrians. Stops in parking lots are “open to the right,” creating unsafe situations for customers where other vehicles can drive around the bus on the right (unlike boarding at a curb) and put passengers at risk of being hit.
 - Need a better emergency distress call system in the buses, like radios or a single call button. There have been emergencies where the drivers are either threatened themselves or the immediacy of the situation is such that drivers cannot take the time to make a call to dispatch.
 - Many bus stops throughout the city are not ADA-accessible. How is it expected that drivers will be able to deploy the lift and serve all customers with conditions like that?
 - Need to have a mechanic on duty before 8:30 a.m. to do pre-trip inspection and be available to handle minor repairs. As things currently work, drivers are left to make decisions prior to 8:30 a.m. about whether a vehicle is safe/operable to take out on the road. Sometimes this results in breakdowns on the road that cause poor service for several hours thereafter for the bus service to “recover” to normal.
- Red Route
 - The only places for bathroom breaks on the Red Route are San Juan College, Chula Vista Park, and Orchard Plaza (Big Lots store). Chula Vista is closed in the winter, leaving even fewer options at that time of year.
 - Red Route scheduling is doable for driving and passengers, but does not allow adequate time for driver breaks.

- Drivers run early or “hot” on the bus stop outside City of Farmington offices to make this schedule work. It has gone either unnoticed or unresolved.
- Green Route
 - The Green Route is scheduled too tightly. If nothing goes wrong and drivers follow procedure to the letter, then the route will operate 3-5 minutes behind schedule each hour.
 - If there are incidents, accidents, unusually high numbers of wheelchair boardings, or similar, the route can easily run 10-15 minutes behind schedule.
 - Drivers take “short-cuts” to make this route’s schedule work, most often by skipping the Ricketts Park/Aquatic Center stop or by indirectly serving it by not following the prescribed routing.
 - Bathroom breaks are available in theory at the Airport, the VA Clinic, or Orchard Plaza. In practice, Orchard Plaza is the only one where the bus schedule permits it to actually occur.
 - Airport stop should be eliminated or operated only by request. There are very few riders on an annual basis, as in less than ten in an entire year. The run-time up and back is wasted.
 - There is a dirt stop at the Walmart. Handicapped people can’t use the bus at this location because wheelchairs can’t maneuver well enough in the dirt to get to the bus lift.
- Express Route
 - The Express Route is doable according to schedule and procedure, except during high-traffic times such as during the holidays and on other occasions when accidents/incidents created above-normal traffic congestion. At those times, drivers had to speed to stay on schedule.
- Bloomfield Route
 - Need to add an “outbound” (toward Farmington) stop near the post office. Passengers ask when the bus will be passing back by that location as it loops to return to Farmington. Drivers aren’t supposed to stop at unmarked locations, but passengers have made the request.
 - Someone at the jail is telling released persons that their wristband entitles them to a free ride to Bloomfield or Farmington. Drivers are told that there are no free rides. This situation needs to be clarified.

Comments about Proposed Routes and Services

- Need a route across Crouch Mesa. There is a lot of population up there.
- Need to make sure that schedule problems (overly-tight schedules and high operating speed requirements) are not repeated in any future services or routes.

Comments about City of Farmington Management Practices

- The City of Farmington is rigid in its demands of drivers and is not receptive to driver feedback.
- The City of Farmington Management is not “called to task” by City Council.

- Having a driver committee won't do anything new or different if the City of Farmington does not observe and respond to driver feedback.
- Hard-line control creates a culture, first of distrust, and subsequently, rule-evasion.
- City Management needs to pay more attention to day-to-day operations.

Comments about Contractor Management Practices – PMS

- PMS treated drivers like oil-field “hands.”
- Although driver input was invited and appreciated by PMS Management, it appeared that very little happened between PMS Management and City Management to respond to driver input. The result is that drivers did not feel their input was valued or respected.
- PMS did not do ride-checks or spot-checks consistently. Some of the problems we've had would have come to light sooner.

Comments about Contractor Management Practices – First Transit

- First Transit has already stated their policy on mobile phone use. They will fire you if used while the vehicle is in motion. We are only allowed to talk after the bus is pulled over and is fully stopped.
- The radios in the Trolleys are not connected. It has been a point of contention about who would be responsible for connecting them, the City or the contractor.
- First Transit has already stated they will be placing “secret riders” to watch drivers' behaviors and performance. They're going to lose drivers with that policy.