

**95th Meeting of the
Metro Area Transit Coordinating Board
June 29, 2023
Virtual Meeting**

Members Present:

Steve Lindaas, Moorhead City Council
Brad Olson, West Fargo City Commission
Denise Kolpack, Fargo City Commission
Kevin Hanson, Chair
Amber Borah, Dilworth City Council
John Strand, Fargo City Commission
Ryan Nelson, Moorhead City Council
Cindy Girdner, Valley Senior Services

Members Absent:

Brian Arett, Valley Senior Services
Gabrielle Lommel, Concordia College
Teresa Stolfus, M|State
Paul Grindeland, Valley Senior Services
Brit Stevens, NDSU
Annie Wood, MSUM

Others Present:

Julie Bommelman, City of Fargo
Michael Maddox, FM Metro COG
Matthew Pinotti, First Transit
Jordan Smith, City of Moorhead
Cole Swingen, City of Fargo
Lori Van Beek, City of Moorhead
Ayden Schaffler, FM Metro COG
Luke Grittner, City of Fargo

1. Call to Order and Introductions

Chair Hanson notes that is quorum is present and officially began the meeting at 8:01 AM.

2. Action Items

a. March 15, 2023, Meeting Minutes

**b. Proposed Moorhead U-Pass Fees for Academic Year 2023-2024 (Previously tabled) –
Lori Van Beek**

Van Beek introduced the proposed U-Pass fees agreed upon by the Minnesota colleges in the region. The group decided to go with the current inflation rate – 6%, leading to a total fee of \$84,880. The recommended action was to approve the U-Pass fee increase. Mr. Hanson asked how this fee is funded. Van Beek said it comes from a combination of student tuition and college fees.

Mr. Stand moved to approve the proposed U-Pass Fee for Academic years 2023-2024. Lindaas seconds. Motion approved unanimously.

c. Continue discussion on Free and Promotional Fares – Julie Bommelman

Bommelman brought forth a continued conversation on MATBUS policy regarding free and promotional fares. Research was done into how other bus organizations have handled free/promotional fares, from major marketing campaigns to slashing fares during COVID. Bommelman refers to a paradigm shift in regard to COVID and working, with many people working remotely long-term and fewer people working downtown. Transit organizations have offered free and promotional fares to encourage downtown travel, and she noted that these organizations did not necessarily appear to be losing funds,

Bommelman notes that several organizations ended this trial run after 1 year. Larger agencies could do a lot more in regard to free and promotional fares, and could partner with other groups and organizations. Larger agencies have a commitment to be funded and fares are not what they are concerned about. These agencies are more concerned about servicing low-income groups and marginalized communities. They were all concerned about servicing all the populations in their cities, however.

MATBUS would like to develop partnerships with local businesses, agencies, and proposes a policy regarding free and promotional fare, pending legal team approval and public hearing.

Hanson asks what the recommended motion would be. Ms. Bommelman says that the motion is, pending legal review, to approve the new policy on free/promotional fares.

Lindaas moves to approve the new MATBUS policy on free/promotional fares. Olson seconds. Motion carried unanimously.

d. Preliminary 2024 Operating Budget – Lori Van Beek and Julie Bommelman

Ms. Van Beek notes that Moorhead has not yet completed a preliminary budget for 2024 for the following reasons. Minnesota has underfunded the budget in previous years, and says to use the current budget surplus to make up for lost budget. Caps budget increase at 3%, and requires minimum local match of 5% (new this year). Because of these policy changes, MATBUS can almost fully fund the organization in MN with state funds. Notes that there was a placeholder for an on demand transit vehicle, for use in 2025 and 2026 in areas where there is no current bus service. Fund/order in 24, implement in 25 and 26. She notes that First Transit has been purchased by Transdav, and received a message from them regarding driver wages and driver shortages. They received 3 proposals, which are currently under review. In addition, Moorhead pays part of the fees for the transportation center and garage facilities. In addition, Fargo HR department has not added wages or COLAs, so it is hard for Moorhead Transit to add wages/COLAs to the preliminary budget. Hopes to get these numbers soon. Fuel prices have stabilized, and they do not expect increases. Moorhead has bid going out in July. Van Beek notes that Moorhead Transit implemented a new account-based fare structure in 2022, so there will be no fare changes in 2024. Recommended motion is to approve based on the considerations listed and to bring back a final budget at the next meeting.

Kevin Hanson asks if there is more time to extend the contract. Van Beek says there is one more year in the contract, and notes that First Transit is a subsidiary of TransDav now.

Mr. Lindaas moves to approve for the preliminary budget to be finalized and brought to the MAT Coordinating board at the next meeting. Olson seconds. Motion carried unanimously.

Bommelman introduces the preliminary budget situation for the Fargo side of the river. Fargo Transit is in a similar situation to Moorhead, but do not receive operating funds from the state of ND. No legislative session changes to this this year. They do receive about \$400,000 a year from the state via other funding sources. Unsure if there will be changes to that funding, based on license sales and tax revenue. Fairly minimal amount but still money, Bommelman notes. Notes that finance director left, and city of Fargo has appointed an interim director, but staffing is short so things have not gotten in the system yet, including wages and COLAs. Asking to move forward and tie applications in 2024 with Moorhead based on what the City of Fargo finance department finalizes. Notes that she feels regretful about not having the numbers in yet, but feels as though it is necessary to bring this forward now.

Olson moves to approve the Fargo preliminary budget for finalization and for the final operating budget to be brought back to the MAT Coordinating board at the next meeting. Kolpack seconds. Motion carried unanimously.

After the motion, Bommelman notes what grants Fargo MATBUS will be going for in 2024 through 2027, using estimates. Notes MATBUS is looking for a new Southwest Metro transit hub, likely at West Acres Mall but nothing is set in stone yet. \$2.2 million grand total to fund research and development of this transit center. Fargo MATBUS is looking at adding a mobility manager position. 80% funding through federal grant – Mobility Share. Fargo MATBUS is looking at expanding the Metro Transit Garage using grants to meet the needs of staff (drivers, technicians, garage staff).

Hanson asks if these will come into the final budget. Van Beek says yes.

Olson moves approval of the additional grant research and information. Lindaas seconds. Motion carried unanimously.

3. Informational Items

a. 2023 Operations Report for March and April, including 5-year trend – Cole Swingen and Lori Van Beek

Swingen introduces the operations report for the Fargo side of the river for the months of March and April. Notes two routes have decreased services due to driver shortages. NDSU students have led to increased ridership on route 13, which services campus and downtown Fargo. Route 15 has experienced cuts but remains stable in ridership. Increased consistence in routes 18 and 20, which increased ridership. Route 24 saw increased ridership. LinkFM increased by double the ridership for the Celtic festival. On-Demand services have seen drastic decreases. Notes that some percentage of riders did not transfer to a new app, leading to the decrease. Paratransit seems to have stabilized. NDSU routes are seeing increase in ridership, except for route 32. Route 34 saw a 119% increase, due to more reliable timing measures.

Van Beek notes that Moorhead lines are also seeing increases, expect for Route 6 which was under construction. Notes she expects to see that route increase now that construction is complete. Route 2 saw a decrease in drivers but no decrease in ridership. Notes that Swingen added a comparison to pre-COVID, notes that Moorhead ridership numbers are close to 2019 numbers but still under. Swingen notes that Fargo is fairly low compared to pre-COVID levels. Swingen introduces college ridership, and notes that M-State has seen significant increases. Other colleges have remained solid. Van Beek notes

that senior ride had 82% recovered from COVID. Swingen notes that 2018 and 2019 are still higher than 2023 in a chart showcasing ridership. At the end of March 2021, free fares ended, leading to a decrease in ridership from March to April. Swingen attributes lower 2023 ridership to weather cancellations and delays.

Nelson asks what was done different to lead to the increase of M States ridership. Van Beek responds that enrollment is up and some marketing was done in the school.

Lindaas asks if route 34 increase was due to students being able to see when the bus was going to come via app. Swingen notes that Niskanen Hall now is included in the time table which he believes helped. Lindaas asks if overall MATBUS has a way to track overall app usage, specifically in regards to the college students, as he believes that they are more likely to use the app for timing bus arrivals and departures. Swingen says that they can do surveys but do not have way to track app usage. Notes that students are now going from using paper maps to the app. Van Beek notes that new software has been purchased, and that the old software is dated and has been bought and sold several times. Notes that students would like to see this app improved.

Olson asks if other routes have the capability to track buses. Swingen says that all routes can do this via a live tracker on the MATBUS website. Van Beek says that what is missing is not needing to be in the live tracker to see the bus approaching – picking favorite bus stops and seeing when a bus will be there while idle via notifications. The new software will have the ability to do this.

Hanson asks when the software will be implemented. Swingen says the beginning of 2024. Van Beek notes that when Fare Box receives a payment it geolocates and tracks the nearest bus stop, so they have some ridership data via that means. Notes that Remix is a route planning software that can show where the most people are riding to help guide changes.

4. Other Business

Hanson congratulates Lindaas on his new appointment to a fellowship in Washington DC, and notes he will not be returning to the board.

Van Beek would like to cancel the July meeting, as grants will be due in that timeframe. The next meeting will be September 20th, 2023.

Hearing no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:42 AM.