

ON THE MOVE

HAMPTON ROADS TRANSIT'S QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER • SPRING 2023



HAMPTON ROADS
TRANSIT

Transit Advocacy Day

Hampton Roads Transit staff and commissioners gathered in Richmond on January 23 for Transit Advocacy Day to speak up on behalf of transit riders in the hope of helping leaders learn more about this critical service.

Representatives from public transit agencies across the Commonwealth spent the day in polite conversation with members of the Virginia General Assembly's Hampton Roads delegation, discussing the importance of publicly supported transit services. Lawmakers listened as advocates talked about the success of the microtransit project in Newport News and Virginia Beach and the need for continued support for it. While the service has ended, the data shows tremendous promise in this approach as a potential new mode of service.



With more than 30,000 trips logged since last summer, microtransit has proven to be an invaluable service to customers, and it's a key reason that HRT extended the service by one month beyond its initial end date, commissioners said.

Lawmakers were not only excited to hear about ongoing efforts to recruit and train bus operators, but they were eager to share this information with their constituents. HRT staff were able to provide information about two upcoming career fairs, which several lawmakers said they planned to share with their districts.

Transit Equity Day

Hampton Roads Transit provided free bus, light rail, ferry, paratransit and microtransit services on Friday, Feb. 3, to commemorate Transit Equity Day. Transit Equity Day is a National Day of Action that marks the importance of investing in public transit for the benefit of all citizens. It also draws attention to the birthday of civil rights icon and public transit rider Rosa Parks.

Bus headlights were on all day to symbolize the light Rosa Parks provided our world. Each bus also had a reserved front seat with signage honoring her courageous act that helped make transit more equitable for all. Parks played a pivotal role in the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955 after she refused the order of a white driver to vacate her seat in the "colored" section of the bus once the "white" section was full.



Her quiet act of civil disobedience to the Alabama segregation laws helped inspire the African American community in Montgomery to begin a boycott of bus services that lasted over a year. Eventually, bus segregation was ruled unconstitutional in November 1956 under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14 Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Hers was an important symbol for the emerging Civil Rights movement then being led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. As her legacy lives on, so do the legacies of the many Freedom Fighters who acted for justice.

Base Circulator Began Free Service at Naval Station Norfolk

Transit services once again resumed in December to Naval Station Norfolk where free shuttle service became available to personnel who live and work at the nation's largest Navy base. The Blue and Gold routes connect major destinations, including the ship piers, the Aquatics Center, and locations along Decatur Avenue, Massey Hughes Drive, and Gilbert Street.

The Gold Route originates at the Hampton Roads Transit bus stop at the Navy Exchange and operates along portions of Maryland Avenue, to Bunker Hill, Gilbert Street, Towway Drive and back to Hammond Avenue. The Blue Route starts at the Gilbert Street and First Avenue bus stop and serves locations along Virginia Avenue, the piers along Decatur Avenue, along Massey Hughes Drive, Towway Drive and then Gilbert Street.



Both routes now operate Monday-Friday from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Blue runs every 15 minutes and the Gold every 30 minutes. The Gold Route also operates on the weekend, 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., every 30 minutes, while the Blue is idle on weekends.

The circulators provide what transit professionals refer to as “last-mile accessibility” for employees who wish to arrive at the base by conventional means, or who park in the Exchange area outside the gate, but then must walk to their destination. The service is available for anyone who needs to travel from one side of the base to the other. For a facility as big as Naval Station Norfolk, that can be a significant inconvenience.

On Demand – Transit Like You’ve Never Seen It

What’s the best way to serve areas that have little transit and for which funds are not readily available? One solution is transit on demand. On July 10, HRT launched a six-month pilot service to provide on-demand public transportation in select regions of Newport News and Virginia Beach. And while it has stopped for now, the data generated from the project suggests it holds promise for a revival.

The project was called HRT OnDemand and it was a unique service that allowed customers within two designated service zones to request a shared ride using a smartphone app. To book a ride, customers used the OnDemand mobile app which people could download from the App Store or Google Play. Customers then requested a ride - with pickup and drop-off locations – and the system provided ride options.



Riders were directed to a nearby “virtual bus stop” within a short walking distance, and a driver was dispatched to meet them at that location. Customers were picked up in a van that carried the HRT brand. Rides could be shared, but everyone had a seat. The goal was to explore how on-demand transportation can be used to expand the region’s access to flexible, equitable mobility, and make it easier for residents to connect with existing public transit options.

The service ended in early February, and is being evaluated for its effectiveness, ridership performance, and lessons learned. The service was established in areas where transit offerings were thin. The data showed 26,258 total ride requests in Newport News, and 13,037 in Virginia Beach. Both cities showed higher demand in the afternoons.

The Rt. 112 Takes Off, and 114 is Close Behind

In just two months, ridership on the newly expanded Rt. 112 in Newport News and Hampton grew significantly with over 17,200 more customers boarding in November and December than during a similar period the year before.

Farebox data shows that 65,879 customers boarded the 112 in those two months compared with 48,625 during the same period the year before – a difference of 17,254 boardings, or 35.5 percent increase.

There were many factors driving the change.

Changes implemented in May returned evening service to the route which had been suspended due to bus operator shortfalls. HRT continues to focus on the hiring and retaining bus operators so that we can return service to normal throughout our system and match the recovery in transit use as COVID continues to subside.

Another significant factor was the addition to the Route 112 of 15-minute service during the peak periods, the first time that transit riders on the Peninsula have had access to high-frequency service. The route serves downtown Newport News, Patrick Henry Mall, and Lee Hall.



Overall, the growth in ridership underscores what HRT surveys and transit riders have said for years: that providing more frequent, reliable service and improved amenities and customers will use it.

“This is the evidence we always knew would be there,” said William Harrell, President, and CEO of HRT. “Providing more frequent service is key to encouraging more people to try transit. We are excited to see these numbers and look forward to a further expansion of the 757 Express throughout our service area.”

In May, HRT will expand the 757 Express concept to Route 114 which serves Mercury Boulevard and Downtown Hampton with 15-minute service during peak hours Monday through Friday.

The 757 Express Program is envisioned as a network of 13 bus routes connecting the highest densities of people and jobs in the region. Customers will catch a bus every 15 minutes during peak hours 6-9:00 a.m. and 3-6:00 p.m. every weekday. The first route in this network was the 112. As HRT’s operator employment situation improves, more routes will be added.