

Nevada County Transportation Commission meeting – November 8, 2023

Truckee Tahoe Area Regional Transit Report

Presentation by Alfred Knotts, Transportation Program Manager for Town of Truckee

Alfred Knotts:

We have done a lot of great things up at the Town, a lot in cooperation with NCTC. One thing we have implemented over the last couple of months, even the last year, is our micro transit program. The Town Council has been very supportive of and funding that through general fund dollars, and also our local partners such as the hospital, the airport district, and they continue to fund our Truckee local service and our Dial a Ride too. We haven't adjusted that route or those systems at all. This has been in addition to those, so there's a lot of redundancy in the system, but what we have seen is a considerable amount of increase in ridership even with that redundancy. We haven't essentially cannibalized our riders from other parts of our system. We've grown the system significantly to the tune of about 250%. The added service has really brought out a ton of new market and new demand that we knew was there but has been untapped, or really just hasn't been meeting that demand because our fixed route service operates from 6:30am in the morning until 6:30pm in the evening. We not only have tapped into transit or non-transit dependent folks, we helped increase the service for people that don't have a car also. And we have seen that through our surveys as well.

Our monthly ridership in October and September of 2022, when we did not have a pilot during that time, we've had this ebb and flow and now we are on a year-long pilot. The red bar that you see is our fixed route. Then our Dial a Ride, and then our Target Connect service, which we wanted to highlight just as a snapshot of July of this year. In one month, we carried essentially what we carried over 50% of the whole last year with just our fixed route or Dial a Ride. But during that time, we also continued to see increases in ridership. During last winter and that last summer period we continued to see increase in ridership in our fixed route and our Dial a Ride services too.

We really think we have moved the needle on exposing people to transit. Micro transit has been somewhat of a gateway joke. We joke about it, "Hey, the Town does have a transit system and has all these different options. Now that I know I can use it and get me where I want to be, I can have a different need and use a different service." And all of our services, aside from our general public Dial a Ride are fare free as well so that removes a huge barrier, that there's not different tokens or different apps that need to be used, or different fares or transfers or anything like that. It continues to be strong.

Another thing that we've focused on or has been eye-opening to us through this pilot period, among other things, is during the shoulder season right now, even in the midweek, we're carrying 450 people per day and that's essentially just slightly off of what we were carrying during a peak time in the summer. A lot of locals continue to use the service and we see that through our demand, mostly during commute hours too, we see high peaks during that time as well.

The number of riders per vehicle is a very good question and something that my council members have asked. Through the operator we have and through the algorithm that they developed through their app, we provide a little more wait time, but during that time we've increased our shared rides from 27% up to now 55%, so that has increased significantly. It is a fine line, do you want to wait another 15 minutes and lose the people that are on the bus because they have to go pick up one more person that may be way out of their way. They may have already been on the vehicle for 20 minutes and now they're on there for 40 minutes. It is a fine line but we have increased that to close to 60% over 50%.

Our fixed route is fare free as well. Based on our ridership, we were collecting probably about \$35,000 a year. It was costing us just about as much money to administer counting it, accounting for it and auditing it, as it did just to subsidize it at 100% of the fare. That was done, I believe, in 2020 if I'm not mistaken, before my time, before my arrival when Kelly Beedy was in my position. I don't want to belabor all the statistics here but we were in the six figures of carrying passengers when we were averaging about 30,000 passengers per year. Now we're over about 120,000 passengers.

The pilot that we operate for the Tart Connect, which is the micro transit, serves the entire town. It didn't through our first couple of pilots. The Dial a Ride serves the town in its entirety as well. Placer County runs their own Tart Connect system. It is all branded the same, similar to our fixed route systems, everything looks and feels the same, but on the app it won't let you book a trip to Placer County or anything like that. These zones that are geo-fenced keep you within that zone but it will direct you, it will say you can't make this trip, however North Tahoe has a micro transit system, because we do use the same operator. They could meet at the depot and they could get on the regional system at that point.

I do think, through all of this exposure, and we'll learn more through our surveys, that people realize that transit can work for them in the Town. That it's not just for the visitors, it's not for those other people. It has really become a community amenity in a short amount of time. The elasticity was spoken to through another example, but transit elasticity usually has a long feedback loop. Sometimes it's one to two years before you roll out a service and you wait to see people actually using the system because they have to get comfortable with it, familiar with it.

But we've rolled out the system and it's pretty amazing that the feedback we've gotten is pretty much people have clamored for it and they really use the system, whether it's visitors, locals, children. We've seen a lot of children use it in terms of getting to afterschool activities. Parents that don't have to leave school or leave work to go run their kid over to the rec center then run back. They're right there reducing five to six trips just in running your kids around on a daily basis.

Between June and October 2023, the carryover between a peak season to a fall season, we're carrying on an average about 400-450 passengers per day. Thursday seems to be the highest that was skewed to some extent, obviously with Truckee Thursdays, but even in the fall period after Truckee Thursdays is concluded, we're still seeing Thursday being our highest day of ridership when a lot of people are doing economic activity like going out to dinner when they couldn't use transit before because it ended at 6:30pm. During the fall period, it ends at 10 o'clock and then in the peak period, it ends at midnight. People are going out enjoying town, or getting to work and they can get home from work.

Who's riding and why? We get daily reports on this from our operators too. The app that we have allows us to see literally the next day, first how many riders we had? Who went where? What time? We can also dispatch the number of vehicles that we need during peak times. Sometimes we'll have five vehicles in the morning or even three vehicles and then we can know in the afternoon we're going to see these upticks that we can deploy seven vehicles on the fly.

It was challenging not making a tweak every day of trying to dial in everything on a knee-jerk reaction. But a lot of the drivers live in the area, which is good, and are mostly available. That hasn't been too hard to overcome once we got this dialed in. We've drilled this down to the neighborhood level too. Some of this was done originally with the color of money we received from folks because we got money from Donner, we got dollars from the visitor's association and then also from the hospital. We wanted to see where those zones were, so now we've broken that down to see where people are using it. Again, it helps us deploy the vehicles as well.

Who's using it? What are they using it for? We can structure our hours and vehicles. There's a lot of different reasons why people are using it, but we don't want the residents saying "Oh, it's just for the visitor." Or the visitor saying it doesn't work for me. We wanted to make sure we are meeting all trip purposes and types. A lot of different social activities, but a lot of just going to work, so it's meeting a variety of different needs and demands as well. And some will be kids just typing in "other" and saying, "I had to go get ice cream" or "I had to go to the rec center." But things that we did see on there, too, is a lot of people were dropping off their cars or being able to go home or run activities or errands during that time.

Very eye-opening was a lot of people are using it to get to the depot to use Amtrak, which again, is first mile last mile solution. People aren't having to leave a car downtown and pay for it. We've had a lot of people email the Town manager and myself about how grateful they are for the service because

now they have a way to get around and they don't need to bring their car at all. Again, trying to make that cultural shift but also that mode shift as well.

This asks the question again, are we really just replacing somebody that would've driven regardless? A lot of people would've driven alone, some people would've driven with others. I think the big eye-opener here is the disparity of people that have access to a car that would've driven alone but the high percentage of people that would've had to walk, that tells us they don't have a car. Without this option, they may have had to leave an hour, an hour and a half early just to get to their place of employment versus now they have more reliability and again, being free, that's a big benefit with the disparity of incomes.

Besides housing, transportation costs are the number two costs within a household. To remove that cost to them is significant in terms of their discretionary expenditures. Another eye-opener was, and we've heard this directly from folks too, is that they would not have made the trip. We had almost 900 inches of snow up in Tahoe and Truckee, and a lot of people said they would've just stayed home. The social aspect of being able to get out meet downtown and have coffee when they normally would not have made that trip, they just would've stayed home, so this is a social and economic benefit as well.

How do we best deploy the vehicles? How do we be fiscally responsible? Not having 10 vehicles out when there's not the demand. There were cases when we first rolled out the pilot, that vehicles were picking people up in five to 10 minutes. That was almost too responsive. People weren't ready for the ride so they would cancel the ride and then they would try to book the ride again, so trying to find that sweet spot. The sweet spot that we've marketed to people and what we have within our contract is that 20 to 30 minutes is what we feel is reasonable, that it's responsive enough. And again, that's back to the question about the shared ride. We've increased that almost double from 27% to 54%.

We continue to do marketing. We've upgraded the app so that now it is in Spanish as well. Also, just reaching out to folks, tying all of our programs together. I'll speak to the bike share that we've implemented as well. Last year, it wasn't deployed, we've rolled that out this summer. I'll speak to that in a little bit. But really just tying all this together, that people can make different choices throughout the day, that, "Hey, I took Tart Connect, it's going to take me 45 minutes but I have a bike share over here and now I can take this bike share and I can get home or I can still make the last part of my trip with some reliability."

We deployed our bike share program this summer, it came out at the end of June. We have about 100 docking stations around the whole town. We had a high concentration downtown but also all the way from West End Beach out to Glenshire and then down to the airport and then up at Henness Flat, which is up by Alder Creek Middle School as well. This has been rolled out in partnership with BCycle, who is owned by Truckee at no cost to the Town. They've assumed all the risk and all the costs, all the labor, hopefully they're making money but it was very well received, and the fact that they are part of Truckee and that culture, it's really not a big money maker for them, they're very open about that. It's really to build a culture of bicycling and what they believe in. That's very well with the Town and with the county objectives in terms of our culture, economy, recreation, kind of our way of life.

Not everybody can go out. E-bikes cost thousands of dollars and a lot of people just don't have that. Most people don't have that discretionary spending, so to have that access has been very, very eye-opening to us also. It really makes it available to a wide range of families that come up too, from a teenager to the parent to the grandparent now can go on a bike ride together at 6,000 feet, which they typically would not normally be able to do if they came up for the weekend.

In a three-and-a-half month period, we had about 3,200 trips. The miles ridden was about 20,000 miles, enough to bike the US coast to coast more than eight times. The carbon offset essentially equates to about one pound per mile. Time spent riding comes out to be about 64 trips or about 400 miles per bike, with about 50 bikes. People are taking long trips on these, and whether they're using them for sightseeing or work or whatever, it's still a VMT reduction, so these numbers are very encouraging.

Of the most popular stations, the Glenshire Trailhead is the highest use. On Truckee Thursdays, at the end of the night we'll find 15 bikes out there because everybody rode home rather than driving, or maybe took Tart Connect to there but didn't take it home because there was a long wait. At Donner Lake Boat Ramp too, people are riding all the way around the lake as an activity or experience they may not have normally done. We also have a station at 50/50 Brewery, so we have stations pretty well strategically placed throughout the Town.

A project we completed was the Railyard Mobility Hub, the transit center in the railyard in the redeveloped area. We started that in July, and we just completed the project last week, it is all online ready to go. We still have to get additional funding for the Mobility Hub Traveler Information building, that is a different phase of the project, that's part of the TIRCP funding that we received. Some of the SB 1 funding will go to our maintenance facility up at Stevens Lane. We installed hydronics in there too as part of our equity program to make sure that this facility is as well maintained and essentially the same type of amenities that we treat our other public buildings. That's all being completed. There was no federal funding, some funding from STA Capital but a lot of general fund dollars and then other state dollars that we got as well. We'll be bringing that online in the next couple of weeks to serve in the winter time. Phase 2A is a parking lot that will have some solar components and some electric charging as well. Then Phase 2B will be the building itself. The thought is, too, that right now everything's down at the depot such as the California Welcome Center and everything, and we'll transition all that over to the Transit Center as well. And that will probably be built in 2025 with Phase 2A going to construction next summer.

We've been completing portions of the Legacy Trail, Phase Four, which goes from Brockway and there'll be a bridge and that will go over to West River. West River looks like a whole new environment, which is the idea, sidewalks along there, and there are opportunities for public art, public spaces, better managed parking as well. It just looks like a whole new corridor that's been not necessarily neglected by any means, but really was due for some improvements and it looks great if you guys haven't been up there.

Church Street, if you're familiar, goes in front of the Transit Center we just built and Mobility Hub, and now it ties into Glenshire Drive too, that used to not have a connection there, so people would have to go all the way back to Church Street. The density over there is as the railyard proposes and the master plan is going to be pretty vibrant. That's all been built. There is also a portion of Trout Creek that runs under that bridge that's also been restored as well so super exciting stuff. The cold stream roundabout over there by Donner Lake, that's the overpass over there by the Shell Station, has all been done too. During the 4th of July egress, it functions fabulously in getting folks out of the West End area and out of the Donner Lake area versus that stop and go friction, confusion, even air quality of what we talked about earlier about the stop and go traffic. It functions phenomenally, too, very encouraging.

Just one other thing that I wanted to highlight because these are just great projects too is we've done a lot of public art recently, such as the piece of art that is part of the Rockaway Trail to the left, which is actually a portion of the Legacy Trail. It is not a mural necessarily but a piece of art that was done in panels to break up that monolithic gray of the retaining wall.

This sculpture on the right is at the Donner Lake boat launch ramp and it actually was constructed out of trash and materials pulled from Donner Lake, it was just completed last week. It is a very cool piece of art. They did a similar piece down in South Lake Tahoe as well and it's very cool. I just wanted to tie that in also because it is part of our transportation engineering program to really spruce up and beautify and really make our right of way more engaging.

Commissioner:

One of the interesting things I noticed in the staff report, Alfred, is it looks like the cost per passenger on Tart Connect is now less than on the fixed route rides.

Alfred Knotts:

Yes. A lot of that has to do with the shared vehicle or the shared rides. The driver is essentially the same cost almost as our fixed route but it really is the fact that it's going to pick up a revenue rider, even though we don't charge a revenue, our fixed route sometimes driving around and it may or may not pick up anybody for one whole route or one whole headway. This is direct going to the demand and meeting that demand. The more shared rides we can get, obviously that brings that cost down per passenger and per vehicle service hour and mile.

Commissioner:

I just have one real quick question. The funding that goes into this program for the free rides, is that going to stay sustainable from all those people that are giving money? That long-term contract?

Alfred Knotts:

Yeah. On the fixed route, Truckee local route that is long-term sustainable on the Tart Connect, the micro transit. We are running to a point where we need to figure out what a long-term sustainable revenue stream would be. We just did some polling recently to talk about a potential tax measure to be a self-help measure to fund this and other transportation programs.

Commissioner:

Inspirational report, thank you.

Alfred Knotts:

Thank you.