

Staff Report

HIRTA BUS SERVICES

May 13, 2014

BACKGROUND:

After a Dial-A-Ride customer shared their thoughts on the current level of door-to-door transportation services provided within the community, the Transit Board of Trustees and Ames City Council requested further discussion with customers. **Specifically, the City Council requested an update regarding HIRTA services and customer satisfaction/concerns/non-concerns be placed on a future agenda.**

This report provides an update on the status of, and satisfaction with, door-to-door transportation services provided within the Ames community by the Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA). It is important to note that HIRTA provides two distinct services within the city limits of Ames. While the riders for both services are on the same buses, the two different services have their own set of service requirements and fees structures. These differences have no doubt caused confusion among the riders and their caregivers.

I. AMES TRANSIT FUNDED SERVICE (DIAL-A-RIDE SERVICE)

The Dial-A-Ride program is the American's With Disabilities Act-required service for disabled individuals within the community. This service is under operational oversight by the Transit Board of Trustees as set out in Chapter 26A of the City Code. This service is provided by HIRTA under a three-year contract that expires on June 30, 2015, but requires annual renewal of the contract. The total dollars actually expended for this contracted service in 2012/13 was \$133,908. The 2013/14 adjusted budget for this service is \$140,000. The renewal will be considered by the Transit Board and City Council in late May/June 2014. CyRide staff monitors this program and reports to the Transit Board and the Federal Transit Administration regarding compliance with federal ADA regulations. This program is generally referred to as, "Dial-A-Ride Service".

Public Meeting (Dial-A-Ride Service)

The Transit Board of Trustees requested that CyRide and HIRTA staff hold a public meeting with its Dial-A-Ride customers. Currently there are 285 individuals eligible for this federally-funded program, of which approximately 120 residents are currently using the service. An invitation to the April 10th public meeting was mailed to each customer's home address. Eight individuals were present at the meeting as well as Council representatives Goodman and Betcher. The following table recaps the number of comments received from these individuals, grouped into service categories.

Aspect of Service	Number of Comments
General Comments	6
Eligibility	0
Reservations/Scheduling	15
Trip Denials	2
Driver/Buses/Safety/Other	8
Total Comments	31

Of the information provided, concerns regarding the reservations/scheduling process garnered the most comments. This concern focused on the amount of time residents were placed on hold before they were able to speak to HIRTA reservations staff. As of the end of March 2014, HIRTA was able to fully staff this function by adding two additional reservationists. The average time on hold was reduced from over 3 minutes to around 1 minute; however, at busy times customers may be on hold for significantly longer periods of time. HIRTA staff shared with those present that they are also able to schedule their trips via email to alleviate this issue.

The remaining comments may be placed into two programmatic categories – requests that:

- Address ADA requirements
- Go “Above and Beyond” ADA requirements

The Transit Board of Trustees discussed the requests that address ADA requirements and approved the following three activities to enhance current services:

- **Notification** - Modify the scheduling process to require all customers to be notified when the Ames scheduler moves their pickup time. While trip times are approximate and can vary depending on customer and traffic issues, a courtesy call when HIRTA needs to modify a time even a few minutes will improve communication with its riders.
- **Education** - More and continued education with existing and new reservations staff regarding customer service and programmatic differences between funding programs.
- **Trip Denials** – Coordinated effort between CyRide and HIRTA to try to better understand customer comments about being denied a trip. More research on when customers indicate they have been denied a service request as well as education to customers about the programs ability to meet every trip request could further improve communication.

Several requests go beyond what is federally-mandated for service to the disabled community. These included:

- **Will Call Trips** – While ADA requires customers to call in at least the day before, HIRTA currently allows will call or same day trip requests for return transportation customers after a medical appointment as it is difficult to accurately estimate when doctor's appointments will conclude. It was mentioned several times at the meeting that it can take awhile for HIRTA to pick customers up after they notify HIRTA staff that they are ready for their return trip. This happens as will call trips must be "fit in" between existing scheduled trips and it may take some time before a bus is free to be able to accommodate this unscheduled trip. Customers shared a desire to see quicker response times for these trips.
- **More Capacity** – It was mentioned at the meeting that schedules are tight and that drivers don't have enough time, particularly at certain times of the day. Customers would like to see more buses available for the service.
- **Extended Office/Dispatch Hours** – Several comments centered on customer's difficulty in getting a hold of staff, dispatchers and drivers after 4:30 pm each weekday and on the weekends. Currently, after office hours, HIRTA's phone system will transfer Story County calls to the Ames HIRTA office and if this office is closed, will then roll to an emergency cell phone that the evening/weekend bus driver's answer when they can safely do so. Customers would like direct access to office staff during evening and weekend hours.

Consideration of services "Above and Beyond" ADA requirements would require 100% local funding as federal dollars may only pay for federally-mandated services. The Transit Board of Trustees did not approve modifications at this time that go "Above and Beyond" federal ADA requirements.

Customer Surveys (Dial-A-Ride Service)

With the exception of the transition year between Heartland Senior Services and Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA), CyRide has distributed a Dial-A-Ride customer satisfaction survey each year since 2011 to gauge the general level of satisfaction with the Dial-A-Ride service as well as to gain suggestions on where improvements can be made. In mid-March, all eligible Dial-A-Ride customers were mailed a customer satisfaction survey. Of the 285 survey's distributed, 44 were returned for a 15.4% return rate. In comparison, CyRide received 42 surveys in the previous year's survey. The following general highlights and variations from the previous year's survey are as follows:

- Overall satisfaction with the Dial-A-Ride service has improved over the past 12 months increasing from 64.1% satisfied/very satisfied to 73.1%.
- Dissatisfaction with reservation staff has improved significantly over the past 12 months – up from 62.2% to 75.6%

- Long wait times for reservation staff and receiving a busy signal were noted as service quality that had declined in satisfaction, but has been addressed.
- While the process of completing eligibility determination has not changed in the past twelve months, customer satisfaction has decreased on the length of time to make this determination– from 89.7% to 79.2% (ADA requires this to be completed within 21 days and is completed by CyRide staff).

II. ASSET FUNDED SERVICE (HIRTA SERVICE)

HIRTA also provides door-to-door service for the elderly, disabled, and general public within Story County, including within the City of Ames. This service is funded under federal and state contracts as well as through ASSET. The City Council, through ASSET, is responsible for oversight of this portion of HIRTA's service within Ames. This program is generally referred to as, "HIRTA Service."

The City funds general transportation services to Ames residents through one way trips and once weekly one way trips to Iowa City with **no eligibility requirements** to receive service and **all trips are open to the public.**

The following are the dollars allocated by the City of Ames -"ASSET dollars," for general HIRTA Services for 2014/2015. The City's contribution through ASSET is capped for reimbursement at \$38,133 for in-town trips.

SERVICE	COST PER UNIT	AMOUNT
Transportation --One Way Trip --Ames	\$12.09	\$38,133
Transportation--One Way Trip --Iowa City	\$462.50	\$2,000

HIRTA supplied statistics to ASSET regarding their ridership in the Fall of 2013 for their 2014/2015 ASSET budget request. In that request, HIRTA indicated that for Ames only rides, that ridership increased over a 1,000 rides in 2012/2013. They indicated that this increasing trend would continue in the 2014/2015 request. They also noted that ridership is at or near trip capacity every day. HIRTA uses a scheduling software program (RouteMatch), which captures ridership and trip data on every customer. HIRTA also provided data for 2012/2013, showing service to 425 clients in Ames. Those clients were provided a total of 54,022 rides. A ride is a one-way trip. These numbers do not reflect the rides to Iowa City, which is another service that HIRTA provides through ASSET dollars. There have been no complaints received by City staff related to this service. HIRTA also noted growth in ridership in Story County.

HIRTA conducts an annual survey of its Story County clients. **The results from the June 2013 survey are attached.** Forty-seven individuals responded to the survey.

Surveys were distributed on the buses for the entire month of June and were also available to take on the HIRTA website.

Information from Mainstream Living Accessibility Survey Results

The Mainstream Accessibility Survey was sent in mid-January via Survey Monkey to case managers, guardians, members and to all Mainstream Living employees. Mainstream Living received 203 returned surveys; of these 82% were from employees, 9% were from members, 5% were from parents/guardians and 4% were from Case Managers.

The following information was gathered in the Mainstream Living study related to HIRTA services:

- Case Managers, guardians and employees stated that HIRTA, the contracted transportation provider in Story County, is often excessively early or late, changes or cancels rides with no notice, has demonstrated poor communication, etc.

HIRTA indicated that they have been working with Mainstream Living since early April 2014 and have established single contact with this agency and a single contact with HIRTA to improve communications. HIRTA also indicated that it worked on all the scheduled trips to Mainstream because HIRTA had at least six buses at the same time making drop offs in the morning and pickups in the afternoons, so HIRTA now has staggered those times. HIRTA has sent out a Compliance and Training person to assess the change on several occasions and HIRTA staff reports it is working much better.

STAFF COMMENTS:

In regards to the Dial-A-Ride service, the 2014 customer survey seems to indicate that there have been improvements made by HIRTA in the past year that have had a positive impact on customers.

Some of these efforts include:

- Meetings with the drivers to improve schedules for both drivers and customers
- New phone system that allows more flexibility to address customer concerns
- Hiring two additional telephone staff within the last several weeks to address longer wait times to get a hold of reservations staff
- Meetings with reservation staff regarding different requirements for the Dial-A-Ride program as opposed to HIRTA's other funding programs - also counseling on customer service expectations

- Working with reservation staff to become more familiar with locations around the City of Ames

With the above changes and the Transit Board of Trustees approved modifications/investigations, it is believed that further improvement in customer satisfaction will be made in this program over the next year. As with any new endeavor, there is a learning curve and HIRTA has been willing to make modifications to meet customers' needs within funding and federal constraints.

In regards to the ASSET funded service, it also appears that there has been a positive response to concerns that have been brought to the attention of the HIRTA staff. The update to their telephone system as well as the addition of a scheduler is evidence that that they are attempting to be responsive to customer feedback.

HIRTA Public Transit Survey / Story County 6/30/2013

QUESTION / RESPONSE

1 Please rate the quality of overall Service

1. Disappointing	1
2	3
3	10
4	23
5. Exceptional	10

2 Please rate how well our service meets your transportation needs

1. Disappointing	0
2	1
3	6
4	24
5. Exceptional	18

3 Do the current hours of service meet your needs?

Yes	42
No	3

4 What service improvements would you like to see?

- * Have scheduling of trips done in Ames
- * Have buses arrive at the time scheduled.
- * Buses need more room between seats
- * More frequent service to and from Nevada
- * Notify when schedule is changed
- * Let drivers make changes to schedules as needed to meet needs of the people
- * Evening rides from Nevada to Ames for AA meetings, movie, dinner, etc.
- * Better communication between dispatch and driver

5 Please rate the cleanliness of the bus.

1. Disappointing	0
2	1
3	5
4	18
5. Exceptional	22

6 Please rate the comfort level of the bus

1. Disappointing	1
2	5
3	13
4	17
5. Exceptional	10

7 How often do you use HIRTA?

5 or more day per week	23
3-4 days per week	12
1-2 days per week	5
Less than once a week	2

HIRTA Public Transit Survey / Story County 6/30/2013

QUESTION / RESPONSE

8	What is your trip purpose?	
	Medical	23
	Social	17
	Education	1
	Shopping	8
	Employment	24
	Other	10 (Church, Senior Center (Nutrition, ADC), Parole)
9	Does your driver offer adequate support?	
	Yes	44
	No	0
	Sometimes	3
11	How important is our service to your transit needs?	
	1. Not very important	
	2	
	3	5
	4	9
	5. Very important	33
12	Please check type of mobility device you use, if any	
	Cane	6
	Wheelchair	2
	Walker	15
	Other	1 (Guide Dog)
13	Please rate the ease of scheduling a ride	
	1. Difficult	5
	2	4
	3	11
	4	13
	5. Easy	14
14	Rate the courtesy of the scheduler	
	1. Disappointing	1
	2	1
	3	9
	4	12
	5. Exceptional	22
15	Rate the courtesy of the driver	
	1. Disappointing	1
	2	0
	3	4
	4	16
	5. Exceptional	24

HIRTA Public Transit Survey / Story County 6/30/2013

QUESTION / RESPONSE

17	Do you have other transportation if the HIRTA bus is unavailable?	
	Yes	11 (CyRide, Friend, Family. Walking, Own Vehicle)
	No	22

19	Ages of the person or family members who use our service	
	Under 19	2
	20-39	10
	40-59	14
	60 or older	22

Other Comments

Good Organization that helps all

Drivers don't make fun of me