

Along the Lines Episode 27: Mobility on Demand: Transcript

00:8.00

Rich Andreski

Hi, I'm Rich Andreski, Bureau Chief for Public Transportation at the Connecticut Department of Transportation. And I'd like to welcome you to Along the Lines, a podcast series where we'll explore our current issues and ideas on Connecticut's public transportation system. Welcome to another episode of Along the Lines. I'm your host, Rich Andreski. In just the last 10 years, new technology and transportation has led to a revolution in how people travel. In today's world, new mobility now includes autonomous vehicles, on-demand transit, and a variety of shared mobility options. While self-driving cars are still the ways off, there are exciting new options available to Connecticut residents that weren't around even a few years ago. So the question is, what is the future of mobility in our state, and what role will technology play in helping us get around? Joining me today to help answer those questions are Dave Harvey, founder and chief operating officer of Link City, and Joe Comerford, executive director for Nine Town Transit. Gentlemen, welcome to the program.

01:35.00

Rich Andreski

So Dave, let's start with you. Lynx City, what a great name. Can you talk a little bit about your organization, your mission, and what's going on with ScooterShare?

01:46.00

Dave Harvey

Yeah, absolutely. So, um Link City, we started in 2019. We're based out of Bethel, Connecticut. ah We are a last mile micro mobility company. ah We offer um electric means of transportation by way of e-scooter or e-bike. We started at our company because we wanted to bring a new high-tech mode of transportation to customers. and We also have a um ah wildlife foundation mission ah part of our our company as well. In the cities that we operate in, we give back a portion of our revenue to local wildlife rehabilitators.

02:40.00

Dave Harvey

so We're trying to do a little bit better by electric means of transportation for the world and also help ah you know our wildlife. So since 2019, we've expanded to a couple different markets, including Bridgeport, Connecticut. We started in New Milford, Connecticut, a very small market. and We also launched in Orlando, Florida a month before the pandemic hit. Since then, we've had to you know reevaluate our footprint and we scaled back and currently in 2021, we are just operating in Bridgeport, Connecticut and Bridgeport University.

03:26.00

Rich Andreski

Exciting times and certainly a service that lots of communities are looking for nowadays. Would you consider your service say basically a ah last mile solution or are there other roles for for scooters in communities?

03:42.00

Dave Harvey

We do have our you know customers that use scooters for the last mile transportation. We have customers that um have monthly memberships and just use e-scooters for their way of travel um within Bridgeport every single month. We also have a lot of customers that use our e-scooters for leisure and fun. They are a blast to hop on and and ride around your city i always tell everybody get on a scooter you'll feel like a kid again and you'll explore where you live it's a fun time hopping on an e-scooter and traveling.

04:26.00

Rich Andreski

Well dave you know thanks for joining us i'm looking forward to learning more about your program you know ah Joe Comerford um you've also joined us this morning and we're talking about micromobility, which just for our our listeners, it's the concept of you know the the old days of ah public transportation was you had to wait for transit to come to you um at a bus stop or ah or a train station. Micromobility is a different solution to the age-old problem of getting from A to B. So Joe, can you tell us a little bit about what's going on at Nine Town Transit?

5:06.00

Joe Comerford

Sure. so Back in 2015, after about six years of significant ridership growth and doubling our ridership in that period, we started to see a decline in ridership for the first time, which mirrored a national trend that was going on. And so we started looking hard at, are we still meeting the needs of our community? And what we really determined was that people's but demand for travel had changed. And No longer did people want to just wait on a fixed route, on a fixed route schedule. They expect it to be able to picked up when they want to be picked up. And so but early 2018, a company, a software vendor approached us about this idea of microtransit, which was very new at the time. And it seemed like it could potentially be a good solution for us ah yeah we ah in a few different ways. And so at that time, we approached the Connecticut of Transportation with the idea, and we were met with enthusiasm and um on their part. And so we began the process of determining how we would implement such a solution.

6:07.00

Rich Andreski

Yeah. So Joe, ah you know you're you're calling it the extra mile. Maybe you could describe for our listeners you know exactly how that works and how how your customers are using the service.

06:15.00

Joe Comerford

Yeah, so Extra Mile is an on-demand microtransit service. And what microtransit is, to sum it up, is it's a tech-enabled shared transportation that's really a blend of your traditional fixed route transit, ah demand response, and even ah like ride-hailing services. So its routes and schedules are constantly changing and shifting based on rider demand. And it typically uses smaller vehicles like vans or or small buses. And customers either can use a smartphone app, or they can also call in to book a trip when they need it. So you very different from that more traditional demand response model where you have to call at least a day in advance. It's right there on demand. And trips, they'll have to start and end within a designated zone that we've created. And then that trip is immediately scheduled through the software and dispatched to a vehicle. And there's several different uses for microtransit that we look explored. And one's a route replacement. So you could you can sometimes replace either unproductive routes or maybe certain times of the day, like evening routes where you don't have as high ridership. There's first mile, last mile connectors.

07:14.00

Joe Comerford

You could use this replacement for traditional demand response and also you could use it as a fixed route feeder type service. So you kind of use it to feed into a mainline route. And yeah so people always ask us kind of what's the difference between micro transit and other ride sharing platforms. And you know for one, as I said earlier, that you have a designated zone. So your trips have to occur within a smaller area. So for us, that area is about 50 square miles ah versus our overall dollar ride area. For instance, it's 330 square miles. So it's ah it's a much smaller service area. All the vehicles that we use are accessible. We have that call-in scheduling option, which is very different from ride sharing platforms. And it's also shared rides.

08:02.00

Joe Comerford

You're not necessarily going to get picked up and going straight where you're going. We do aggregate trips and and and group them together.

07:59.00

Rich Andreski

So Joe, you know, you and Dave both started these really great new services just ahead of the pandemic. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what effect that has had on

ridership. Have you seen any changes in the types of trips people are taking time of day, day of week? ah So if you could go first, I'd like to hear from Dave as well.

08:23.00

Joe Comerford

Yeah. So yeah, we launched in May of 2019. So we weren't even a year in before the pandemic hit. And we definitely saw a decline immediately in March and April kind when everything was shut down. ah But what was interesting was while we saw a decline, we did not see a decline anywhere near what we were seeing on our fixed route at the main response services. So where they were down 80%, our extra mile only dropped about 40%.

08:51.00

Joe Comerford

And it also rebounded a lot quicker. We were back by October. We were back seeing month to month increases. And fast forward to today, we are now hitting our highest numbers yet. So it's it's come back a lot quicker than our other services have come back. And in terms of how it's yeah where people are riding and and who's using it, that has changed as well. We designed it really as a first mile, last mile connector around the train station, the Shore Line East and Amtrak stations in our region. When we first did a study, study we found that 46% of people were also using Shore Line East. Today, that's a much, much smaller number. We're seeing significantly fewer trips. um images It's a very small number of trips now going to the train station. We're seeing more people are using it to get to other places more like shopping and work.

09:35.00

Rich Andreeski

And is your fee system of a fixed price for ah regardless of distance or is there a a distance component to it?

09:43.00

Joe Comerford

So we launched it as a free pilot. We were working on implementing a fare, deciding what a fare would be, being a new type of service right before the pandemic hit. And the entire state bus system went fare free. And so we just now are getting back to revisiting a fare, which we are going to be holding hearings in the next month. um And what we've proposed at this point is a flat fee. That current software vendor we use is only capable of doing that. um And we're what we're looking to do is put it in line with our fixed route service and accept all the same fare media, ah because we do get transfers between the services. So we want to make sure that it's as easy as possible to move from one of our services to another.

10:23.00

Rich Andreski

So same question to you, Dave. What effect is COVID having on your business and the the ridership patterns that you're seeing?

10:30.00

Dave Harvey

Yeah. So when COVID hit nationally, ah we saw that people were shifting their ah ways of transportation away from using the bus or ah you know a rideshare like an Uber or Lyft. And um they were looking at e-scooter transportation and um electric bike transportation a lot more than they were before. But but you know throughout the pandemic in different market, we saw different responses. um you know When we were operating in Orlando, we saw a um you know a big decline in ridership because we' we're in a you know a vacation city. And then in Bridgeport, ah we saw a big uptick in ridership ah because a lot of people were enjoying the new transportation method.

11:28.00

Dave Harvey

So ah you know our company saw mixed results in different markets, which is very interesting. But um all in all, we definitely saw that ah you know people enjoy e-scooter transportation and um they they felt a lot and safer from you know possibly getting COVID than their more traditional transportation methods.

11:56.00

Rich Andreski

You know, ah Dave, your new company, ah not so new anymore, but your company is on the forefront of what's really happening in our urban centers. you know Planners and developers are rethinking how our cities are are built. And you're really offering a solution um that meets the needs of a lot of folks that don't want to, either want to or don't um have the financial means to afford a car. And a car is an expensive proposition, plus you've got to find a place to park it in a city. So really exciting. I'm curious, as you look out beyond you know COVID and beyond the immediate few years ahead of us, where do you see how do you see your business evolving and growing with cities?

12:59.00

Dave Harvey

Yeah, I don't think um we're going to stop at e-scooters or e-bikes. I think that yeah this whole thing is going to continue to evolve. People want to ditch gas powered cars. It's not great for our

Earth, and they're looking to have more environmentally friendly and more cost effective solutions. you know ah We've seen what the pandemic did for vehicle purchases. yeah know Not everyone can go out and buy a \$30,000 to \$50,000 vehicle, but \$99 a month to have your own personal scooter to ride around wherever you want within your urban city is a lot more affordable. And um you know people are showing that they they like that. And I've never seen a person frowning on any scooter before. It's a lot of fun.

14:00.00

Rich Andreski

yeah I had an opportunity in Columbus and Cincinnati a few summers ago to to ride their their scooters. and I have to agree, it is it is exhilarating to be out there. and With you know increasing availability of bike lanes and other pedestrian amenities, it's increasingly safe to ride a scooter in in cities. you know so It wasn't that long ago where ah Uber and Lyft didn't exist. And you really had only a few options. You had your own personal vehicle, you had public transportation, which was a ah scheduled service, and you had taxi. And taxi was not um always available. And when it was, it was typically available from only a few hubs, otherwise you had to call ahead. So this is really a a very, what we call ah in in the industry, this disruption. Disruption is happening at many levels in transportation right now. So I'm wondering to Joe, you know you're seeing probably your first in the state here to experiment with a transition from a traditional fixed route service to a this new micromobility solution. I'm wondering what you think the outlook looks like for public transportation. is It's a question that weighs on my mind quite frequently. ah You and I have not talked about it, so for our listeners, where where do you see public transportation going in the next five to 10 years?

15:48.00

Joe Comerford

That's a big question. Yeah, I think it's, as you said, it's probably the most disruptive time I've seen in my 20 years in this industry. It's also exciting. I think that we're going to see more micro transit, but I don't think it looks like it could ever totally replace fixed route because there's still certainly a need in certain locations and certain densities to continue fixed route service. It just makes sense in certain areas and certain core corridors. But it seems to be a great way to serve some of the more outlying areas and smaller areas. um The other place that doesn't work well is longer distances. So many of our fixed routes are more regional services, and they connect you know to hubs, like to New London, to Middletown. So those are difficult to do in a microtransit method because of ah the amount of vehicles you would need to keep your wait times down. So I think it fills a new space and it replaces some of what we did before, but certainly not everything. I think it's going to be a new tool in the mix of ah transportation options that we can provide to our communities.

16:51.00

Rich Andreski

No doubt. I think what you're doing with Extra Mile and Dave, what what you're doing with Scooter Share is very complimentary to fixed route transit. and frankly, where fixed route transit struggled was if you were someone that didn't live along the route, you might have had a very long walk and even potentially a long drive to the fixed route service. So what what you're doing now is really opening up public transportation and putting it in reach of more people.

17:22.00

Joe Comerford

And I think both of these methods really do are great around rail stations because the first mile, last mile issues are far bigger on on rail than they are on and even fixed route bus, particularly out in the suburbs where're where we're running this pilot.

17:37.00

Rich Andreski

Dave, you want to weigh in on that?

17:40.00

Dave Harvey

ah Yeah, we see a lot of customers, you know, ah pick up an e-scooter from the train station. So ah they are using that from one transportation method to to another.

17:53.00

Rich Andreski

You know, we have a lot of listeners on this program that come from, you know, their elected officials, policymakers. We've had, I mentioned developers and planners on the program. And I'm wondering if you're speaking to our audience right now, and they're contemplating these kinds of services, what lessons learned might you offer them? And what should they be thinking about if they want to establish a micromobility service?

18:20.00

Dave Harvey

Well, I think that is a very long list of conversation. I think the best way to go about it is if you're interested in learning more about um what Lynx City can do for for your city municipality, give us a call. It's 888-HEYLYNX or just visit us on our website, lynx.city and fill out the ah contact form and we'll get back to you. We'd love to sit down, do a presentation for you, and ah talk about all the different benefits that e-scooter or e-bike transportation can do for your city. Hey, Dave, if you could give that web address again um and spell it for our listeners. Yeah, absolutely. It's links.city, ah L-Y-N-X dot.C-I-T-Y. So the dot city replaces the dot com

19:15.00

Rich Andreski

Beautiful. I love it. And Joe, any, any lessons learned for our listeners?

19:21.00

Joe Comerford

Yeah, I think that, um, you know, it's really kind of tempting to just kind of go out there and throw out these on demand zones. But I think that the way that we did it worked really well for us. You know, we, we had a few different ideas of what might work, but we, partnered with a software vendor that was able to provide a simulation beforehand. So we simulated our different ideas and settled on the one that that showed it was the the going to provide the best results. That really helped us eliminate the other options, really. And we knew going in exactly how many vehicles we would need to meet the demand and and what to expect for demand. And it has proven to be it's taken a little time to get there, but it has proven to be pretty accurate. So I certainly recommend going through that type of activity to get some sense of if the if it will work in the way you think it will work, because that's been very successful for us.

20:21.00

Rich Andreski

It is remarkable to see what both of you are doing and to think about the pace of change. I grew up with the Seinfeld series and they're back on Netflix and it's interesting to watch the storylines. and how the storylines in each episode are so outdated nowadays. The you know the notion of how to meet up with somebody years ago, um the unavailability of cell phone service. um you know These weren't things in the 1990s, right? and yet The way we live has changed so dramatically in a few decades, and it's it's fun to think about you know how different life and mobility will be in the future. you know we're We're living it now. We're experimenting. There's no doubt that it's going to be very different, five and and ten years out. And I think it's for the better in the long run. I mean, the the idea that getting around should be easier. It should be um it shouldn't be a luxury to you know to be able to go when you want to go and have to own a car. That that shouldn't be available only to certain people. And so um I'm excited about this. What would you like to leave our listeners, maybe as a you know a wrap up thought, what would you like to leave our listeners with in terms of your aspirations for the future, you know the possibilities going forward?

21:57.00

Dave Harvey

Yeah, absolutely. um you know we We hope to continue to and spread our footprint throughout Connecticut. Again, you know we'd love to talk to more cities and municipalities. um But ah for the people who haven't tried to ride an e-scooter or an e-bike, I definitely suggest getting with a

friend or family member who has, and hop on one and and give it a try. Even if it's not for um you know your needs of getting from A to B, just to hop on one and riding around town, you're gonna feel like a kid again, and it's a lot of fun. If you visit our website, you'll actually see our CEO's parents um riding the e-scooters and e-bikes on the ah the short videos we have on our website, which is pretty exciting. So people of all ages, 18 and plus, can and can ride these devices. So give it a shot and um you'll be happy you did.

23:07.00

Rich Andreski

Fantastic. I'm looking forward to it. and I see you have the ah yeah those e-bikes too. I'm on your website now. Very sharp. so Joe, thoughts about aspirations and where we go from here?

23:22.00

Joe Comerford

Well, we are hoping to be able to offer some additional microtransit zones. We have at least two more that came out of the ah bus study that we did about a year ago. One, will be in Middletown around Wesleyan, connecting Wesleyan University to downtown. think that's ah We know that there's a ah critical need there to have better connections to downtown Middletown from the university. and And there's some others planned for other parts of our district. So we think there's opportunities to duplicate this in other places around our district and further enhance people's mobility options throughout our service area. And I do think you know potentially there's certainly potential in the future that it could, to some extent, replace some of the traditional demand response and ADA paratransit service that we do today in a way that gives people a little more freedom you know and not have to book that that day in advance. ah we We hear that a lot already. People really like that feature of it over our more traditional services. So I think there's tremendous opportunity, especially as the technology just improves.

24:31.00

Rich Andreski

And Joe, you and Nine Town Transit are partners with the DOT, so let's together keep an eye on those discretionary grant programs coming out ah through the federal government. Definitely want to partner continue to partner with you on these initiatives.

24:46.00

Joe Comerford

Yeah, absolutely.

24:48.00

Rich Andreski

So gentlemen, you know thank you for making the time to to join me today to talk about this exciting topic. I always love, anyone that knows me knows that I love to talk about the future. It's exciting. where You two are leading the way in terms of rethinking how people get around and really appreciate your time today. Thank you thank you for being with us on the program.

25:14.00

Rich Andreski

And thanks once more to our guests, Dave Harvey, COO for Link City and Joe Comerford, Executive Director for Nine Town Transit. And with that, I'm Rich Andreski, and this is another episode of a Along the Lines.

25:29.00

Rich Andreski

So Joe, you're executive director for Nine Town Transit, which is a public transportation system in Connecticut. Can you talk a little bit about your organization, your services, and what you're all about?

25:42.00

Joe Comerford

Yeah. So we are the public transit operator for the Lower Connecticut River Valley, which is the area around Old Saybrook, Connecticut. It's about 330 square mile and service area. And we operate a few different services. we do Traditional fixed route services we do. as well as Demand response service for the general public in our more rural areas. We do ADA paratransit service along our fixed routes. We also offer DBA fixed route service. And we do it a taxi voucher program in addition to our new services.

26:25.00

Rich Andreski

And really filling a a key need for folks in the lower ah Connecticut River Valley there in in terms of transit. And and i I should, for our listeners, add that in Connecticut, um we have a very rich network of public transportation services. ah Some are operated under the CT Transit branding. Those are contracted by the state. And then we work with a local or regional partners like Nintown Transit to provide additional services in air and ah other areas of the state. So together, um you know, we have a pretty rich network of ah public transportation ah services. And so thank you, Joe. I really appreciate that explanation.

27:13.00

Rich Andreski

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