

## **Episode 38 - Customer Experience Action Plan**

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**Ben Limmer**

Hello. I'm Benjamin Limmer, Bureau Chief for Public Transportation at the Connecticut Department of Transportation. I'd like to welcome you to Along the Lines, a podcast series where we'll share exciting news and updates and explore current issues and ideas on Connecticut's public transportation system.

00:38.39

**Ben Limmer**

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Along the Lines. I'm your host, Ben Limmer. The Connecticut Department of Transportation has recently developed its first-ever customer experience action plan for transit customers across this state. The plan was developed by engaging with public transportation service providers, stakeholders, community partners, and transit customers to collect feedback, as well as to identify actions the department can take to make public transit a more pleasant, reliable, and efficient experience for everyone in Connecticut. With me today to talk more about the Customer Experience, or CX, Action Plan are Alicia Leite, Transportation Supervising Planner of the Customer Experience Unit at the Connecticut DOT, as well as Doug Holcomb, General Manager and CEO of Greater Bridgeport Transit. Welcome to the program. Thanks Ben, happy to be here. Thanks Ben. So Alicia, could you please tell our listeners what the CX Action Plan actually is?

01:53.58

**Alicia Leite**

Absolutely. Thanks, Ben. So first, I really want to just start by talking about what CX is. And so what do we mean when we say customer experience or CX?

02:04.92

**Alicia Leite**

And really what it is is it's the overall experience a customer has when using the transit system. And so this means even when a customer visits a website or does a trip plan, that's part of the customer experience that we're looking at or an experience a customer has when they're onboard their transit vehicle to even when they get to their final destination. And so what we did with this action plan is really take a look at all of those steps that somebody takes along their transit journey. And the action plan really outlines programs, policies, and investments to improve the overall customer experience for everyone in the state of Connecticut. Speaking of steps, could you describe the steps needed to get to the development of the action plan? Absolutely. And so really when we were thinking about doing the action plan, we identified four main goals that we really wanted to achieve. And the first one was really to connect with

customers and really understand you know, their transit experience, and understand the changing customer needs um and expectations for what people want from our transit system. And then to define a vision based off of everything we heard and all of the customer priorities, and then create the action plan, um which is a clear plan that identifies those actions that can be taken to achieve that vision. And so we did a lot of customer engagement.

03:31.34

**Alicia Leite**

We did 36 popups across the state of Connecticut to really get out there and talk to transit customers about what they want to see from their transit system, really what's working, what's not working. We did 29 stakeholder interviews. So really important to us was to engage with our service providers to hear about what they're experiencing when they're operating the services and things they hear from their customers. We did a customer survey. We did 10 customer focus groups. We actually did a transit employee survey because we really wanted to hear from you know the individuals operating the service on a daily basis about what they could use to improve their employee experience and also what they hear from customers. And then we engaged with um even our internal team. So we held workshops to hear about all the work that our bus and rail teams are doing here. And then we held service provider workshops. And so really this was a ah huge collaborative effort to really understand what we as an agency can do to support the customer experience and also to support our service providers and the employees that are are making it happen every day. So it's really been a great effort and and there's so many people that were involved and so very thankful for everyone who participated.

04:53.00

**Ben Limmer**

It is absolutely fantastic the number of respondents and the amount of information that you were able to gather. So big picture, can you share some of the highlights of what you learned?

05:07.18

**Alicia Leite**

And so I think two of the biggest things we learned um was that customers, one of the things was customers really want more frequent service and they want this during off-peak periods and weekends. And really it just comes down to customers want flexibility and freedom to do really all the things. They want to go to visit parks. They want to visit family. It's not just about getting to work and to and from work. So I think traditional commuting schedules of the past are really just not meeting customer needs. And then we've really identified this as an opportunity in the action plan. So really to take a deeper look at how services are provided, when and where they're provided and really align those better with what customers want to see.

05:53.55

**Alicia Leite**

The other thing we heard was customers really want a better experience at stations and stops. So they want better lighting, they want seating, they want real-time information about where their their bus and train is. And so we have identified some actions in the action plan to solve for this. And lastly, I just want to plug, we did a really great video that's on our website, [transitcx.com](https://transitcx.com). It's on our outreach page that really summarizes everything we heard from all the outreach we did. So I really recommend um the listeners to check that that video out.

06:29.00

**Ben Limmer**

Flexibility and freedom. I like it. Transitioning to Doug. ah Doug, what does the action plan mean for service providers throughout Connecticut?

06:41.27

**Doug Holcomb**

Yeah. Thanks Ben and Alicia for inviting me to be on the podcast. I'm happy to be here and talk about what this means to transit agencies and operators and I think maybe others in the state as well. We are big fans of community engagement at Bridgeport. There's really never been a time when we've gone out to work with our customers and others in the community that we didn't find an idea that eluded us in our desk work and our own planning projects. And there's a quote that I'd like to share, if I may. It's from Jane Jacobs, and she wrote in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, um that cities have the capability of providing something for everybody because, ah something for everyone because and only when they're created by everyone. And I think the CX project from the beginning embodied that idea on a transit perspective with so much engagement. So here in Bridgeport, our mantra has been for you know a decade or more, engage, interact, and improve. So engaging with the customers, interacting with the customers, and using what we learned to try to improve the service. And it can be very scary because you often really don't have an idea of what you what you may hear. And I mean, I think that's also a kind of an exciting part of it. So in my time doing this work in Connecticut, which is more than 30 years now, there's never really been anything like it. It's a first concerted effort to reach riders all across the state and across both bus and rail modes. So I think since Alicia and the Conduct team engaged all the service providers and so many customers, thousands of customers, and that's reflected in the plan. There's a ah greater certainty I would ah expect a buy-in to where we go where we go from here and the plans to improve our services. So um I would say that it's a to answer the question more precisely, the plan now but and the work that's gone into it is like a touchstone to measure our success and a roadmap for how we plan for the future.

08:53.95

**Ben Limmer**

Oh, and thank you for that. And certainly throughout your career, you are a leader of public transportation throughout the state. So I have another question for you, specifically, how do you see the action plan impacting your customers that rely on greater Bridgeport transit and the ability to increase your overall ridership throughout your system?

09:20.54

**Doug Holcomb**

Sure, I mean that's a, that's a good question and I don't want to steal anybody else's thunder or any of the things that Alicia might want to talk about and projects at the department. Still, there are elements of the plan which we firmly believe in, and one of them is the concentration on the fundamentals. Alicia alluded to this um frequency reliability and legibility that you know yeah how often the buses run, that relates to reliability, how long time they are, and legibility in our view is you know how easy is it to navigate the system, what you know what materials are available for people to navigate the system. So I think that the CX project confirms this from the rider's perspective. That's what we heard, and that's what the plan now reflects. And ah while there are other improvements recommended, the technology and amenities, you know it's important to keep an eye on on the fundamentals to grow ridership. um and I think ah one of the things Alicia said earlier is really really resonated with me and that's that you know we spend a lot of time talking about bus service and rail and reducing vehicle miles traveled and those benefits. There is another side of it that um I don't want to say overlooked, but doesn't doesn't get as much attention as it should. And that is um the improvement of the quality of the systems for the people who don't have a car to begin with um and you know and are from all walks of veterans and seniors and people with disabilities and students and reentry and refugees and all different folks that arrive in the buses. And you know I hope it's okay to say this, but the department, we've been lucky to be working with the department on a lot of new projects that dovetail with the recommendations in the CX plan and ideas. And and one is the statewide amenities program, which I think is a great, and another first. I haven't seen anything like that before. Statewide information systems for riders to navigate all of the transit systems. A statewide bear program, which helps to remove any barriers to moving between regions and the state. and And then you know it the plan calls for unified planning so that customers' experiences are the same, high quality, wherever you go in Connecticut. I think those are those are all great projects supported by the CX plan, confirmed by customers, um and those will bring us, I think, a long way.

11:57.16

**Alicia Leite**

I just wanted to chime in to say that I really do appreciate all the support that you've given. And and I know you mentioned that your engagement mantra. And so for us in the CX unit, are and our mantra is really communication, collaboration, and coordination. So just wanted to throw

that in there because I definitely appreciate it. And and our ah on our end, really, it's been great to collaborate with all of the service providers for this this project.

12:24.00

**Doug Holcomb**

Yeah. and I think, you know. the time is right. We have tools today that that we didn't have a decade ago. Gone are the days when you place a single legal notice or a couple of legal notices and hope people show up at your meeting. i mean We can reach people in all sorts of different ways. So our ability to understand what the community wants is wholly different today from from how it was a decade ago.

12:50.03

**Ben Limmer**

Well said, and the perfect transition to my next question, Alicia, can you share some of the projects in the action plan that our customers will see but both in the short term as well as the long term?

13:05.00

**Alicia Leite**

So in the short term, and one of my favorite and the one I'm really most excited about is As part of the Connecticut biennial budget, 9.1 million will be available in fiscal year 2024 for increased bus service. And so the focus of this expansion is on better access to jobs, training and education by providing service that operates later seven days a week. And so I did mention that as part of the action plan, people really did tell us a lot that they want. More weekend service, they want later service. and And as mentioned, that traditional commuting schedule just isn't cutting it anymore. Some of the other things, um a micro transit pilot program that the department is going to be funding So that's up to seven micro transit pilots or on demand transit service as we call it. And some of those services will be starting this fall. So two really exciting short term projects in the works. On the longer term side, and and this was recently announced, 60 new rail cars are going to be purchased. Delivery of the first cars are expected in 2026. So this is going to be a huge upgrade to the customer experience for rail customers. And then I know Doug just mentioned this, but this is really huge. We are working on a statewide bus stop enhancement program with investment of 17 million over the next five years to install ADA compliant bus stops and shelters across the state. So some really exciting initiatives that are going to be coming up.

14:39.66

**Ben Limmer**

So as Alicia mentioned, there's been tremendous enhancements made throughout the public transportation system, throughout our great state. This of course includes the recent investment

via the governor's budget supported by the state legislature to significantly ah expand bus transportation services throughout our great state. So I do have a question for Doug. Doug, could you talk about what these investments mean at the local level, specifically to the greater Bridgeport area?

15:15.73

**Doug Holcomb**

Yeah, I'd be happy to. Because of the funding that was made available in the biennial in support of the General Assembly and the governor and um an initiative undertaken by the department to essentially create a discretionary program where all of the transit operators in the state had the opportunity to send in proposed service enhancements focused as the CX found on on frequency and service bands and shoring up the many of the existing services. and And we were fortunate enough to get around \$800,000 for closing midday gaps on three of our different routes. um So that will impact Trumbull and Stratford, Monroe, Bridgeport, and some of the towns for our service up in the valley, Shelton and Derby. And I think, you know, that's for us, that's the first time in a decade that we're actually implementing new services. We've been working hard to maintain the ones that we have. um there is Beyond that, there is another project underway which we think is is going to be great. the Again, through a partnership with the department, including help preparing the application and commitment of matching funding, GBT was awarded a federal grant under a a program called Areas of Persistent Poverty, and this will look really a granular level look in areas of the urban core here in Bridgeport um where there's been you know suspected under investment in in transit and to try to help census tracts where the where the population to 20% or more of the population um has lived in poverty for more than 20 years. So it's it's ah it's a new, a new, relatively new federal program and we're excited about it. And part of the grant we'll be able to use for a full fulfill facility fleet and deployment transition plan to zero emission buses. there There is one other thing I would like to add um and that is a plan like this one is a living document and we have to keep up the engagement. And in order to you know take it to kind of the next level, we'll need a lot of innovation, a lot of coordination and cooperation, and when we'll need resources. We're going to need resources to do these things. And probably there's never been a better time to to assemble them.

17:57.00

**Ben Limmer**

So if our listeners are interested in reviewing the customer experience action plan, where can they go?

18:06.25

**Alicia Leite**

So they can definitely check out our website [transitcx.com](http://transitcx.com). We have a lot of great information on there, including the action plan and an executive summary. We want to just go back out and

talk to customers and let them know the action plan is here. And of course take feedback on how we can improve the action plan. And then we are going to be doing yearly report cards. And so, the department will provide an update to the public on where we're at with the actions and then continue to work very closely with our service providers on delivering those actions. And then we have identified areas of opportunity that we will continue to work with our operators very closely on as well. So some really good stuff coming up and hopefully we can engage with more customers as we go through the process.

18:54.87

**Ben Limmer**

Great. And ah listeners can also go to [gogbt.com](http://gogbt.com) for information on a greater bridge for transit organization and services as well. So with that, as Bureau Chief for Public Transportation, I am excited to celebrate the accomplishments and tremendous efforts put forth by the customer experience team to build this first ever customer experience action plan. The plan will support next steps and path forward for our extensive network of bus, rail, and paratransit services throughout the state.

19:37.45

**Ben Limmer**

We will continue to listen to you, our customers and stakeholders, and respond to all of your feedback and comments. I would like to extend a special thank you to our guests, Alicia Lee from the Connecticut DOT, and Doug Holcomb from Greater Bridgeport Transit. I'm Ben Limmer. Join us next time for another episode of Along the Lines.

20:03.47

**Ben Limmer**

Thanks for listening to this episode of Along the Lines. This is your host, Benjamin Leonard. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please remember to subscribe and share.