Section 5310 Microtransit Planning Study:
Phase I & II Final Report

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Phase I & II Report

BACKGROUND

The full title of this study is *In Pursuit of Seamless Borders: Exploring Microtransit Pilot Viability to Facilitate NJ Community Transit Inter-County Mobility*. The main intent of this planning study was to investigate the feasibility of microtransit as a cost-effective means to meet demand for more seamless, inter-county trips among New Jersey's county community transit customers. For the purposes of this study, the definition used for **microtransit** has been small scale, on-demand, dynamic-route, shared transit services such as shared ride taxis and other non-fixed route operations.

Three main study goals, which were achieved, focused on the following:

1) To determine and document both challenges and opportunities to promote more seamless, inter-county community transit with microtransit through key informant interviews with transit properties nationwide and service providers undertaking similar efforts and via regional interviews with New Jersey's 21 county community transit providers;

2) To identify New Jersey community transit providers as well as viable potential service partners interested in developing and piloting a microtransit, seamless border service; and

3) To develop and present recommendations to facilitate a pilot implementation.

Transportation's vital role in achieving successful community integration for persons with disability and older adults is well documented. Transportation is needed to access both life sustaining and enhancing services and destinations, including but not limited to employment, health care, education, daily living needs, and social/recreational trips. In New Jersey, many persons with disability and older adults utilize and depend on one of the 21 county community transit providers to help meet some or all of their mobility needs. County transportation has served an increasingly significant role in providing community-based transportation in the state since the 1980s. The county transportation systems, including both directly operated services and contracted operations, all offer some form of demand response service typically restricted to persons with disability and older adults, with many also increasingly implementing robust fixed route and/or modified fixed route shuttle services as well.

However, primarily due to funding constraints, service hours are limited among county community transit providers, with few offering evening and/or weekend service. Further, a study undertaken by this Rutgers research team in 2010-12 documented that most NJ county transportation services do not exceed five miles beyond their county's geographic border, and those that exceed that limit, typically do so only for medical trips (1). Recommendations calling for increased collaboration among counties and between counties and other transportation providers to improve service provision was also well-documented in a Rutgers study completed in 2016 (2).

In recent years, the desire to create a "seamless" border for county community transit services has also been discussed by the planning community and community advocates. The concept of "seamless" transportation typically relies on this standard definition of seamless, with a focus on reducing or eliminating service discontinuities and enhancing service continuity. Overall, the main intent of a "seamless" transportation service is one that enables optimum ease of use among customers. Avenues to pursue seamless trips have become more readily available in recent years, due primarily to advances in technology, including scheduling software

advancements and dynamic routing. In addition, the proliferation of new service models and mobility options, such as microtransit, also facilitate efforts to create seamless trips.

Phase I work for this planning study focused on assessing challenges and opportunities related to designing and implementing a microtransit service for persons with disabilities and older adults. The team conducted key informant interviews with seven providers nationwide who shared their experiences and recommendations in implementing microtransit. As part of Phase I work, the team also conducted regional group listening sessions with NJ community transport providers and Access Link staff to better understand their interest and perspectives on how microtransit service could benefit the persons they support. Both Camden County and Gloucester County expressed interest in partnering to implement the pilot and the team subsequently conducted a needs assessment to determine the viability of implementing the pilot in those two counties. To gain a better understanding of existing need for such a transportation service, the Rutgers team explored demographic data for each county as well as 2021 trip data provided by each county's transportation services and by NJ TRANSIT Access Link. These data indicated significant and growing numbers among the targeted populations. The data and analysis also provided the team with information about destinations that customers in both counties can currently access and those that are more difficult to reach. Moreover, the data indicate that while some trip purposes were well-served, e.g., medical trips, others are underrepresented.

Phase II work focused on initiating steps to plan the pilot. A service planning working group was established composed of NJ TRANSIT Local Programs staff, the Rutgers team, Camden SCUS, and the Gloucester County Division on Transportation. Together the group discussed topics including service features, service area parameters, accessibility features, and trip scheduling software and booking mechanisms.

An Express of Interest (EOI) was developed and issued in fall 2022 in coordination with the working group. Four responses were received which were reviewed by Rutgers, NJT Local Programs Staff, and county partners. Findings will assist in informing the next phase of work in the project, which will focus on preparing and releasing the pilot RFP; selecting a partner to offer a turnkey pilot; and implementing the pilot initiative.

Phase I & II Report Organization

In addition to other work products, a total of four distinct task memorandums were prepared and submitted for Phase I & II of this research, as follows:

- Task 1. National Key Informant Interview Memorandum
- Task 2. New Jersey Stakeholder Group Interviews Memorandum
- Tasks 3 & 4. Camden & Gloucester County Transportation Needs Assessment Memorandum
- Task 5. New Jersey Consumer Focus Group Memorandum

Detailed findings are presented in the individual task memorandums included in this cumulative Phases I & II report as appendices. Top-level highlights from each memorandum are presented in the following pages.

FINDINGS

Task 1. National Key Informant Interview Memorandum

The team conducted a series of structured informant interviews with senior management from a total of seven agencies/entities nationwide who have implemented eight accessible services (*primarily microtransit*) within the past three-five years. Gathering direct feedback on service development and implementation from those currently implementing innovative microtransit models was the main intent of the interview task. Findings demonstrated that regardless of agency size, geographic location, or other characteristics, most interviewees employ similar microtransit service features and shared many comparable experiences related to critical topics including service partnering, marketing, evaluation, and lessons learned. The interviews also provided detail on strategies to overcome challenges related to accessible microtransit implementation.

Table 1. Entities Interviewed

Program	Agency/Entity	Interviewee	Title
AC Flex microtransit	Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District (AC Transit)	Robert Del Rosario	Director, Service Development and Planning
Arlington Via Rideshare microtransit	City of Arlington	Ann W. Foss	Principal Planner, Office of Strategic Initiatives
Marin Connect microtransit	Marin Transit	Cody Lowe	Planning Analyst
Newton In Motion (NewMo)	City of Newton	Jayne Colino	Director, Newton Department of Senior Services
Ride KC Freedom On-Demand & Johnson County Microtransit	Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA)	Lisa Womack	Director, Mobility Services
SmaRT Ride	Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT)	Dan Thao	Director, Community and Contract Bus Services
CORTRAN	Roanoke County, Virginia	Paula Benke	Program Coordinator

Key takeaways from the national interview task include the following:

▪ Each interviewee described their respective service as successful and an important tool to meet unmet transport needs among area residents seeking to fulfill a diversity of trip purposes. Factors contributing to microtransit service success focused to a large extent on designing the service to leverage technology to ease and enhance the customer experience. Several also noted that providing a customer-oriented travel option in lower-density areas with limited to no other transit options has also contributed to their microtransit service success.

- Microtransit service technology providers who partnered with interviewees included national providers Via, Uber, TransLoc, DemandTrans, and WHC Worldwide. Overall, interviewees reported having a positive and successful working partnership with their microtransit service contractor, indicating that their respective partner was responsive to agency requests.

- Interviewees reported they can request or have direct access via an online dashboard to desired current and historic service data. Data sharing was only discussed as a significant challenge by the City of Newton, who notably was able to resolve their customer data sharing issue with their service contractor Via when both parties agreed upon new language and procedures.

- Each service explored was designed to optimize customer ease of use and accessibility. Each service permits customers to schedule their trip via phone and all but one (AC Transit) also offers a service app. Marin Transit and AC Transit permit scheduling via a web-based booking system. Each service also permits various fare payment methods, with consideration given to the unbanked.

- Interviewees including the City of Newton, Marin Transit, and Kansas City Area Transportation Authority discussed hesitancy among older adults and/or persons with disabilities to utilize the service app to schedule trips. Strategies being considered and/or pursued to address this issue focused on enhanced marketing and training.

- The cost of implementing a microtransit service varies and is dependent on multiple factors including service area size, service hours, and service partnership details or arrangements. Costs seemed highest among interviewees who operate their service by way of a turnkey partnership, but there was also much satisfaction with these partnerships from an efficiency perspective.

- Each microtransit service explored utilizes diverse funding – three or more funding sources were reported by all – with sustainability varying. Funding sources discussed include a mix of federal, state, local, and nonprofit grants, fare box revenue, general operating budgets, and partnerships with the local business sector and community institutions (e.g., local hospital).

- Both broad-based and targeted marketing and outreach were noted as essential to service success and community buy-in, with the value of maintaining some form of on-going marketing emphasized. A variety of communication approaches were utilized by interviewees, which included station and vehicle banners, in-person and virtual presentations to community social service and other organizations, social media and radio advertising, and service fliers. Many also stressed the power of word-of-mouth service advertising.

- Service evaluation was described as an ongoing, continuous process to gage service success and needed refinements. All interviewees implement customer surveys annually or more frequently, as a way to capture actionable service information. These survey data help the agency to more fully understand customer experiences and any issues related to the microtransit service, as well as any unmet customer needs. Customer satisfaction was described as paramount, especially because private sector transport options like ride-hailing services have contributed to greater customer expectations for public transit as well.

- Several challenges were discussed, including securing sustained funding and operating a microtransit service during an ongoing healthcare pandemic. However, no challenge encountered to date was described as insurmountable. Interviewees generously communicated lessons learned and recommendations including the importance of undertaking any microtransit pilot in recognition that service refinements will be necessary based on factors that may include ridership levels and customer feedback. The value of flexibility was emphasized, as was the idea of giving adequate time for a given microtransit service to attain and demonstrate success.

Task 2. New Jersey Stakeholder Group Interviews Memorandum

The study team organized and facilitated three virtual group interview sessions with New Jersey's county community transit providers, as well as an additional interview with leadership staff from NJ TRANSIT's Access Link service. The primary intent of the county community transit group interviews was to inform participants of the planning study and its goal of identifying pilot opportunities for a NJT funded, on-demand, shared ride, microtransit pilot service among two or more counties to facilitate inter-county travel. The sessions also provided the opportunity to discuss the potential benefits and challenges to implementing a pilot microtransit service to help meet demand for more seamless, inter-county trips among New Jersey's county community transit customers. Finally, the research team sought to identify interviewee interest in participating in such a pilot microtransit initiative.

As advised by NJT, the research team organized the interview sessions with the county community transportation providers in alignment with NJT's regional county organization structure. Thus, three sessions were held with county providers – one session each with counties in the northern, the central, and the southern regions of the state. Discussion highlights included the following:

Inter-County Trips

Participants were asked to discuss trips made beyond their county jurisdictional borders, specifically inter-county trips. Almost all reported traveling up to five miles beyond their county border – at least for certain, primarily medical, trips. Other inter-county trip purposes cited explicitly by a few participants included shopping (Cape May) and group recreational trips (Essex, Passaic). Some participants reported providing transit services for up to five miles beyond the border in general for various trips, not noting any trip purpose restrictions (Cumberland, Mercer, Monmouth). Bergen County shared that as a policy, they do not generally provide inter-county trips.

Somerset County operates a community shuttle route that travels to the New Brunswick rail station located in Middlesex County. Similarly, Hunterdon County's Route 23 shuttle service travels to several sites in Somerset County, including Raritan Valley Community College, the Bridgewater Mall, and the Somerville NJT rail station. Somerset County confirmed that some of its residents use Hunterdon's Route 23 shuttle to access sites in Hunterdon County.

All 21 counties reported traveling to multiple sites for veteran medical trips, both within and beyond New Jersey for veteran medical trips. The two main veteran medical sites that counties provide access to in New Jersey are the East Orange VA Medical Center (Essex) and Lyons VA Medical Center (Somerset). Counties also provide travel for veteran medical trips to hospitals and clinics located in New York, Pennsylvania, and/or Delaware.

Both Essex and Sussex counties provide some inter-county, single-passenger trips through their participation in the current NJT transportation network company (TNC) pilot program, which they both noted has been beneficial to residents. Note the research team and NJT

emphasized that the microtransit planning study differs from the current NJT TNC pilot program as the TNC initiative is focused more on facilitating intra-county, single-passenger trips while the pilot microtransit service would focus on shared-ride, on-demand, inter-county trips using a small transit vehicle.

Each interview session also discussed current or prospective partnerships among county paratransit providers to facilitate inter-county transportation. Two collaborations are of note, the Camden-Gloucester partnership and the Burlington-Camden shared agreement. Currently, Camden and Gloucester Counties successfully partner with one another for sheltered workshop trips beyond their five-mile county boundaries. Gloucester County also has a shared service agreement with South Jersey Transportation Authority (SJTA). Sen-Han Burlington partners with Sen-Han Camden for inter-county trips.

However, other counties reported experiencing challenges in partnering. For example, Ocean County has tried to arrange various customer transfers at the Monmouth County border with Monmouth County's SCAT service but found it very inefficient and challenging. Similarly, Mercer County shared that they had an arrangement at one time with Middlesex County for veteran trips to East Orange, but the arrangement has since ended.

Finally, several participants voiced interest and openness to developing new partnerships with bordering counties to facilitate inter-county trips, including Gloucester and Monmouth Counties. Morris County shared that Warren County recently approached them to discuss potential partnership opportunities to transport residents seeking to access various destinations in their two respective counties. Mercer County expressed interest in partnering with Hunterdon County but explained a key challenge is that the northern portion of Mercer County that touches Hunterdon is rural, as is the southern portion of Hunterdon County, so any collaboration would need to extend service beyond the five-mile boundary into each county to reach desired destinations.

Same-Day Service

Participants in the southern and northern regional sessions discussed customer demand for same-day services. Aside from Cape May County's same-day, on-demand microtransit Ocean City pilot service that was operating at the time of this interview, with Uber providing the technology component – no participants in either of the two regions currently advertise or consistently offer same-day, on-demand service. Several shared, however, that they do receive requests for same-day, on-demand service.

In the southern region, Salem County reported historically there was no demand among customers for same-day service. In contrast, Atlantic and Cumberland counties reported that they will sometimes offer same-day trips if they have schedule availability. All northern regional providers shared that they try to accommodate same-day service requests when their schedule permits and/or for emergencies. Essex County summarized that overall demand in all counties for same-day service might be latent because customers have been instructed they must schedule trips in advance.

Seamless Cross-Border Trip Demand

Participants discussed customer demand for a more "seamless" border for county community transit. Several citing inter-county trip demand lamented that staffing size/limitations preclude the ability to offer these types of trips. Comments shared by counties on this topic include:

- Union County reported high demand for inter-county trips

- Gloucester County reported demand for inter-county trips, including medical

- Sussex County noted demand for out of county mental health and other medical specialty trips
- Morris County reported unmet demand for dental appointment trips to Newark Beth Israel Medical Center in Essex County
- Hudson County shared there is demand among some residents in western Hudson County to access destinations in Newark (Essex) and North Arlington (Bergen)
- Ocean County receives some requests for inter-county travel
- Warren County experiences unmet demand among residents seeking to access destinations in Morris County

Camden and Middlesex counties were unaware of any significant customer interest in inter-county service. Others, including Mercer and Ocean counties, acknowledged that there is likely latent demand in all counties for some level of inter-county service, with customers not making the ask because they are aware of the limits placed on such trips by their respective paratransit provider. As Gloucester County explained, county providers have taught their customers about their system constraints/limitations in terms of inter-county trips; thus, true customer demand is likely unknown.

Notably, several central regional meeting participants discussed opportunities for partnering with NJT's Access Link to offer inter-county service. For example, Mercer County reported that opportunities might exist to provide more inter-county trips in coordination with Access Link.

Ocean County explained that they would connect customers seeking inter-county trips with Access Link if there was more Access Link coverage in the county. Somerset County shared that they have worked with Access Link to facilitate inter-county trip transfers, but like Ocean County, Somerset explained that limited Access Link service in the county is a hindrance to partnering.

Microtransit Opportunities & Challenges

Participants were asked to discuss benefits they think their customers and/or their service might experience if they were to partner with a private provider to offer an on-demand, inter-county microtransit pilot service. Feedback on prospective **customer benefits** focused primarily on the following:

- **Meeting unmet customer demand**. Middlesex County offered that overall, this type of service would give customers more options for shopping, medical appointments, and other trips beyond their county of residence. Gloucester County shared that with the implementation of this type of service they would likely be able to meet the currently unmet transport needs of a portion of their residents currently on the service waiting list. Monmouth County noted that this type of microtransit service would be especially beneficial to residents seeking to access inter-county medical trips, particularly to medical specialists. Sussex County said a variety of benefits could be experienced by customers, especially for those seeking to access employment, travel to the rail station, and to meet other trip needs in the adjacent County of Morris. Several participants, including Mercer, Middlesex, and Ocean counties, specifically discussed potential customer benefits if the pilot on-demand microtransit service could help meet the unmet demand for early morning, evening, and weekend service.

- **Ease of trip planning and flexibility enabled with an on-demand service with customer-centric features**. Several shared that customers could benefit from the on-demand service component in terms of making trip planning easier and allowing greater flexibility in their schedules. Cape May County, which was operating a pilot on-demand microtransit service at the time of the interview, shared that customer feedback on the service was extremely positive, with customers thrilled about being able to arrange needed and desired trips "on a moment's notice." Customer-centric service features mentioned in addition to from on-demand scheduling included the ability to schedule trips via app or telephone.

A few participants also mentioned potential **system benefits** that could be realized by implementing an inter-county, on-demand microtransit service. Those benefits focused on increased or enhanced operational efficiencies. For example, Cape May County reported that the implementation of their on-demand microtransit service has dramatically reduced customer trip cancellations and no-show rates, which were 13% and 3% respectively in 2018. Cape May explained that these significant cancellations and no-show rates "drain the system" in terms of both time and mileage. Overall, Cape May County reported that their new microtransit service has enabled their agency to provide more trips at a reduced cost, with increased ridership experienced.

Participants also discussed **important considerations and possible challenges** when contemplating contracting with a private provider for an inter-county, on-demand microtransit service as follows:

- If a private partner provides the vehicles and drivers, issues including driver drug/alcohol testing requirements, vehicle inspections, driver insurance, and driver training need to be addressed.

- Vehicle accessibility is critical. Some customers may also need assistance to/from the vehicle and/or with packages.

- Technology used by a private partner should be compatible with the technology used by the participating counties.

- The private partner selected should be vetted to determine their level of experience in collaborating to implement similar services.

- Uniform scheduling technology and fare structure should be employed for any regional type of service.

- Trip scheduling must be customer-centric, offering a telephone customer service and trip reservation option, in addition to a service app.

- Data sharing issues must be discussed and addressed with a private partner before contracting. Sussex County offered that data sharing was specified in their MOU for the NJT TNC pilot.

- Contracting with a private partner directly has been problematic for some counties due to restrictions regarding contract language. A strategy to consider is contracting through a third party, as Sussex and Essex counties have done with their NJT TNC pilot projects.

- Pilot planning should proactively seek to identify and determine strategies to address prospective issues that may arise with customers. For example, Sussex County noted that with the implementation of their NJT TNC pilot, they found that their older customers do not always carry their cell phones or have them turned on and can miss the arrival of their TNC ride. In addition, TNC drivers, as a rule, do not wait extended periods of time, unlike Sussex County paratransit drivers. Both of these issues could be experienced when implementing a microtransit service if action is not taken during the planning phase to discuss and develop strategies to address them.

- Service marketing and customer education will be important considerations. Channels to disseminate service information suggested by some participants included service brochures as well as conducting in-person outreach. Cape May County shared that both Ocean City and the County have marketed Cape May's new microtransit service, employing radio, local television, and newspaper advertisements, as well as sending email blasts to city residents. Cape May added that their technology partner Uber has also been helpful with service marketing, as has customer word of mouth. Cape May County also shared that educating customers on how to utilize a microtransit service app effectively could be another potential challenge.

A few participants discussed **possible service models/configurations** for a pilot inter-county, on-demand microtransit service. For example, Middlesex County noted that ideally, a private provider would implement the full service (i.e., technology, vehicles, drivers – a turnkey service), with the County providing oversight for liability and ensuring passenger safety. Similarly, Ocean County recommended that a third-party broker/concierge partner should be contracted to operate the microtransit service, with the county provider acting as a concierge service connecting the residents/customers to the third-party provider. Ocean County explained that such an arrangement would enable county resources to remain in-county and would not require passengers to transfer between vehicles to access inter-county destinations.

Mercer County recommended that the service be viewed and marketed as a premium service, with fare pricing determined accordingly, so there is a distinction between the fare charged for this new service versus standard county paratransit service fare. Ocean County added that even though the service would be subsidized, customers should be expected to pay an equitable fare to help cover costs and deter system abuse.

Tasks 3-4. Camden County & Gloucester County Transportation Needs Assessment Memorandum

The Rutgers team established a Service Planning Working Group to advance pilot planning work. Participants in addition to NJT Local Programs staff included leadership from SCUCS (Camden) and Gloucester Division of Transportation (DTS). It was determined that Camden would be the lead partner on the pilot, with Gloucester as support partner.

A key task the working group focused on was geographically demonstrating the level of need for inter-county service for the Camden and Gloucester County region, looking specifically at likely boarding and alighting locations such as medical services, congregant housing sites, etc. Both county partners shared service data, in addition to Access Link, with the intent of gaining a more complete understanding of the current demand for community transportation in the two counties.

Each county transportation agency provided a representative sample of one week's data dating from October 2021 for analysis. Specifically, the team sought to identify the locations of frequent destinations for those using these services as well as to identify areas within the two counties where the locations of destinations are highly concentrated, all with the intent of informing

development of the microtransit pilot. These data were examined and mapped using online applications and by the NJ TRANSIT GIS staff.

The analysis documents location characteristics of targeted populations (primarily older adults and persons with disability) as well as the origins-destinations currently served by the two county transportation providers, SCUCS, Gloucester DTS, and by Access Link in the Camden-Gloucester region.

Collectively, examining the data from the two counties and from Access Link allows one to see where trips are concentrated overall. Within Camden County, origins/destinations are concentrated in the more populated, western part of the county. Concentrations of origins/destinations are not defined along major roadways, though U.S. Route 30 is a location of a significant number of pertinent destinations. Also, Camden County serves several high frequency destinations in Gloucester County, the main two of which are supported employment sites. However, based on the data it appears they are transporting Gloucester, not Camden County, residents to these two sites likely via a contract with the employment sites.

The data also show considerable numbers of trips in the northern part of Gloucester County, in close proximity to the Camden-Gloucester county line, and extending as far southeast as Williamstown (Monroe, Gloucester County). Gloucester does not make any high frequency trips to Camden County. These data demonstrate the value that could be offered by a microtransit pilot that aims to increase inter-county travel between Camden and Gloucester counties. Demand clearly exists among residents with disabilities and older adults of both counties to access destinations in each. Additionally, unmet demand for other trip purposes and for travel beyond the five-mile boundary is extremely likely.

Finally, these data represent only the trips that are currently made by those using available county transportation and Access Link services. Moving forward, it will be important to look at these data in conjunction with other likely destinations – destinations that are not currently frequented by our target populations – and trip purposes that are not currently being served. These locations and information on target populations were included in data shared with NJ TRANSIT Local Programs and mapped by NJT GIS staff.

Overall, the data explored, which includes a composite map of documented needs (see Figure 1), indicate that significant population in the two partner counties exists to support such a service and that these populations are growing in the region. The analysis of trip origins-destination indicates that customers of SCUCS, GCDTS, and Access Link currently use these services to travel within each county and out of their resident county. However, these services, particularly the two county services, are limited in the number of trips they can generally provide, and more importantly limited in the number of trips they can provide to destinations out-of-county.

One additional goal of this analysis was to provide information that can help guide specification of the service area for a potential microtransit service pilot. One potential strategy for implementation may be to initiate the pilot service in a smaller area and increase areas served over time – so long as the area has sufficient populations to support service. The mapping of targeted populations and current origins-destinations indicates that the areas around the City of Camden (Camden County), the Borough of Glassboro (Gloucester County), and the Borough of Lindenwold (Camden County) each profess higher than average shares of populations to be served and should be considered for inclusion in an initial service area.

Undertaking mapping work, the team considered and discussed with the working group two potential service area configurations: one encompassing a five-mile buffer along the county border between Camden and Gloucester counties, and one showing a seven-mile buffer along

the same county border. Examination of the maps indicate that census tracts with high percentages of people with disabilities are located within the five-mile buffer. However, service area determinations cannot be only based upon the location of high-need populations. Such decisions must also weigh the challenges of serving larger areas as increasing the area served would require more resources and can necessitate longer wait times. It is anticipated at this time that the RFP process will yield detailed feedback on service area size options that will aid efforts to determine the most viable option.
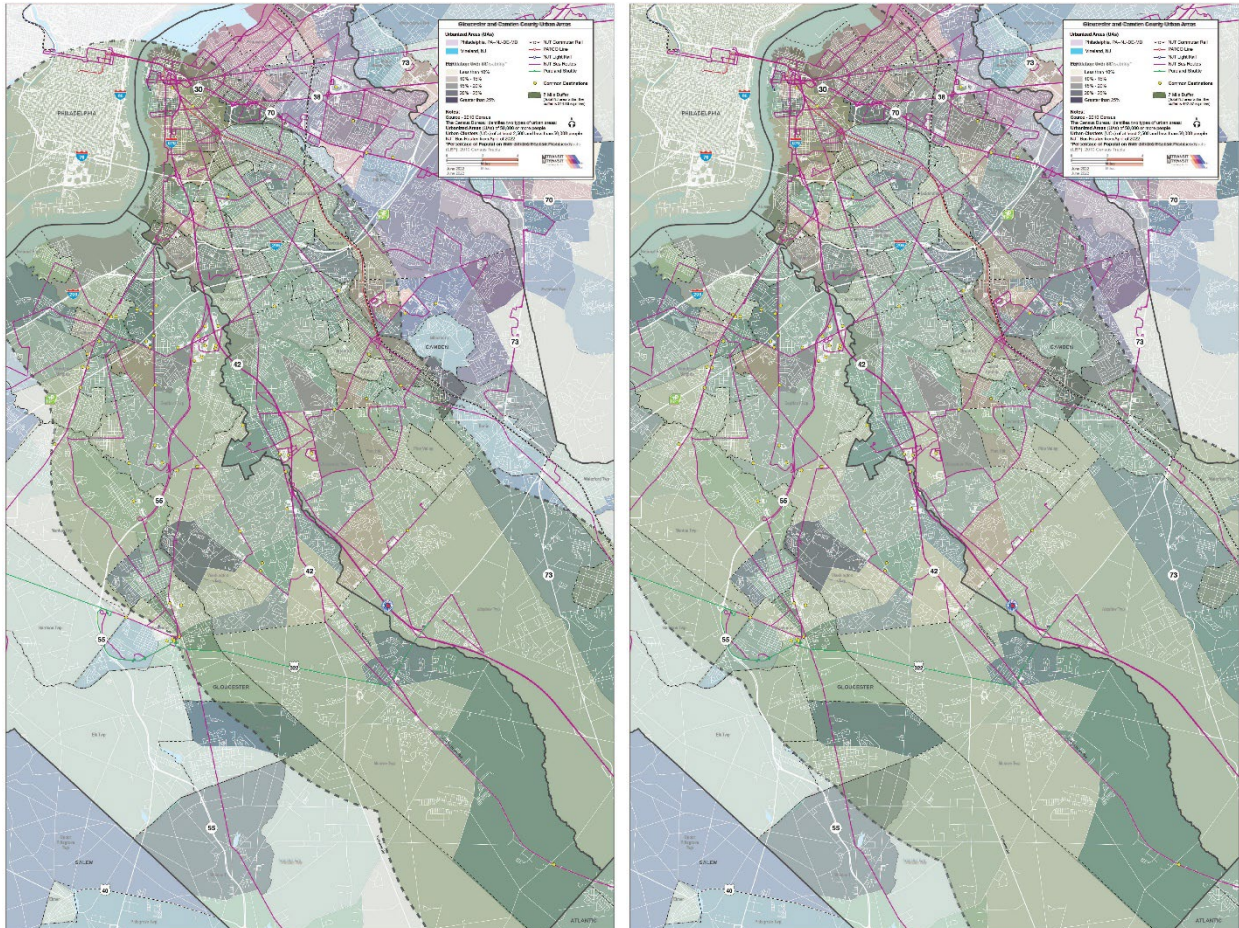
Figure 1. Concentrations of Targeted Populations: People with Disabilities, People Aged 65 and Older, and People with Low English Proficiency (LEP) in Camden and Gloucester Counties.

County border overlay 5 miles (left) and 7 miles (right). Source data: Census 2010, Access Link, Gloucester County Community Transportation, and SCUCS.

Task 5. New Jersey Consumer Focus Group Memorandum

An important component of this microtransit planning study involved capturing feedback on suggestions and concerns related to microtransit service from persons with disabilities and older adults residing in the Camden and Gloucester counties region where this service will initially be piloted. To achieve this goal, the research team convened a total of three in-person focus group sessions.

A total of 25 adults with disabilities and/or older adults residing in either Camden or Gloucester counties participated in one of the three focus group sessions convened for this study. Participants for the two spring 2022 focus group sessions convened were recruited through the Gloucester County Division of Transportation Services and SCUCS, the latter of which operates Sen-Han transportation. All participants from these two spring 2022 sessions were customers of either Gloucester or Sen-Han paratransit. Participants for the fall session were recruited with support from the Center for Independent Living – South Jersey (CIL-SJ), a non-profit organization which provides supports, resources and referrals to adults with disabilities residing in Camden and Gloucester counties. Regarding demographics, participants at this third session represented a younger cohort (age 30 or younger) compared to participants from the first two sessions.

Travel Behavior

Participants at all three sessions shared difficulties in accessing needed and desired trip destinations both within their county and in bordering Camden or Gloucester counties, although they were appreciative of the transportation services they typically used. Challenges included service hour limitations, vehicle accessibility, and waiting lists. Destination types they were most eager to reach included shopping, medical, and recreational trips.

The three most common travel modes among the three groups as presented in Table 2, were county paratransit, passenger in vehicle driven by family/friend, and walking. Other popular modes included NJ TRANSIT Access Link, Uber or Lyft, and NJ TRANSIT fixed route services. However, it must be emphasized that while most participants from the first two sessions reported using county paratransit regularly, no participants from the final session reported using county paratransit. Also notable, most of the participants who reported using ride-hailing services were from the final session.

Interestingly, most participants from the final session explained that they must use more than one mode to access many of their trip needs. For example, one reported using Uber/Lyft along with NJT bus to reach her destinations.

Table 2. Participant Typical Transportation Mode(s) – All Sessions

Travel Mode	# Participants
Sen-Han or Gloucester DTS	13
Passenger in vehicle driven by family/friend	13
Walking	11
NJ TRANSIT Access Link	8
Uber or Lyft	6
NJ TRANSIT Fixed-Route	6
Taxi	3
Drive self	2
PATCO	1
Municipal/Town transport	1

Microtransit Pilot

A significant portion of the discussion at each of the three focus group sessions focused on features of the microtransit pilot. Interest among the 25 participants in various service features are displayed in Table 3, with explanatory detail below:

▪ **Trip Scheduling** – The majority (21) expressed interest in scheduling by phone with a customer service agent, followed by using a smart phone app (11), and/or service website (8). Notably, almost all participants in the final session were open to scheduling by app in addition to by phone and/or web.

Desire among the majority to schedule their trip with a customer service agent focused on several factors. First, a portion of participants in the first two sessions did not possess a smart phone to be able to schedule their trip using an app or service website. Second, many participants from the first two sessions explained they would simply feel more comfortable and at-ease scheduling their trips on this new service by talking to a customer agent. Some also noted they felt they would receive more accurate service information by talking directly with an agent.

▪ **Trip Reminders** – Participants at all three sessions shared strong opinions about trip reminder notifications. All indicated reminders should be sent by phone (automated) and text. There was a difference of opinion expressed on the most helpful timing for these notifications, but the majority requested that trip reminders at a minimum be sent one day before a scheduled trip (21) and also at vehicle arrival (16). The next most common request was for a 15-minute pre-arrival notification, which many explained would offer time for them to undertake any last-minute tasks (bathroom visit, put on their coat/boots, etc.) prior to vehicle arrival.

Interestingly, while a 5-minute pre-vehicle arrival notification is often commonly deployed with microtransit services, only two participants reported it would be helpful, with most explaining that five minutes was not adequate time to prepare for the vehicle arrival.

▪ **Fare Payment** – While this new service will not charge a fare during the pilot period, it was important to receive feedback on fare payment preferences amongst potential

customers for future institution. The most common request was to be able to pay with cash when boarding (11), followed by being able to use a credit or debit card with the service app or website (9). It must be noted however, that the majority of the nine interested in paying for their trip by app were younger participants from the final focus group session who reported prior experience with using apps. Lack of comfort and familiarity and/or lack of a smart phone were the two core reasons participants from the first and second session shared they would either not be able or willing to pay for their trip using the service app.

Also notable, eight participants, most from the second focus group session, requested to be able to pay with credit or debit card with a customer service agent by phone.

- **Other Service Features** – Participants expressed varying interest in several customer-facing service characteristics. Greatest interest overall was expressed for door-to-door service (19); however, most of those interested in door-to-door service were participants from the first two focus group sessions who typically use county paratransit service, which offers door-to-door service. For example, eight participants using Sen-Han service who expressed interested in door-to-door microtransit service explained that while they do not require this level of service, it contributes to their comfort and ease of use when taking county paratransit. Overall however, many participants indicated curb-to-curb service would meet their needs.

  Fourteen participants noted that assistance with bags would be helpful, 12 shared that assistance boarding and exiting the vehicle would be desirable and 11 would like the option for a travel companion. Many of the participants most interested in assistance with boarding/exiting the vehicle utilize a mobility device, such as a wheelchair.

Fostering **service awareness** was a final topic discussed at each of the three sessions. Suggestions from participants from the first two sessions focused on the sentiment that "not everyone has computers, not everyone has phones." Thus, direct mail correspondence was the most recommended outreach approach to create awareness for the new service. Participants from these two sessions suggested that county paratransit providers could distribute notification by mail to their customer database, as well as inform customers of the new service by phone. A few suggested advertising through county websites, adding that county departments such as Senior and Disabled Services could help spread the word.

Participants in the final session were most eager to discuss strategies to foster service awareness and their recommendations focused on marketing the service with advertising on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube.

Several also suggested that a service brochure and fliers should be created and made widely available in the area at local destinations including libraries; Centers for Independent Living; "dollar" stores; local convenience stores; grocery stores; shopping malls and complexes; medical offices; senior centers; and housing complexes. Other notable suggestions included advertising to local college offices of disability services and at college job fairs for students with disabilities. A few also suggested advertising via local television stations.

To conclude, all 25 participants expressed genuine interest and enthusiasm for a regional microtransit service. As one shared, "This is going to be awesome." Most were interested in being able to access more local trips in both Camden and Gloucester counties using the service and were eager to be able to schedule trips on-demand, because most cannot currently travel same-day unless family or friends are available. Overall, many participants emphasized it would be extremely beneficial to have a new service that could help meet their trip needs and

interests, especially social/recreational trips to minimize isolation and foster community connections.

Table 3. Desirability of Potential Microtransit Features

Potential Microtransit Features	Focus Groups			Total
	Camden Session	Gloucester Session	CIL Session	
# of Participants				
Trip Scheduling				
Call phone number and speak to customer service agent	6	9	6	21
Use a smart phone app	4	1	6	11
Use service website	2	0	6	8
Trip Reminder Timing				
One day before scheduled trip	6	9	6	21
30-45 minutes before vehicle arrival	2	1	5	8
15 minutes before vehicle arrival	7	2	3	12
5 minutes before vehicle arrival	0	0	2	2
At vehicle arrival	4	6	6	16
Fare Payment				
Cash when boarding	6	3	2	11
Credit/debit card using the service app or website	2	1	6	9
Prepaid card using the service app or website	0	0	3	3
Payment with credit/debit card with customer service agent via phone	1	7	0	8
Service Features				
Door-to-Door service	8	7	4	19
Assistance with shopping bags	3	5	6	14
Assistance with boarding/exiting the vehicle	2	8	2	12
Travel companion (family member or personal care attendant)	1	5	5	11

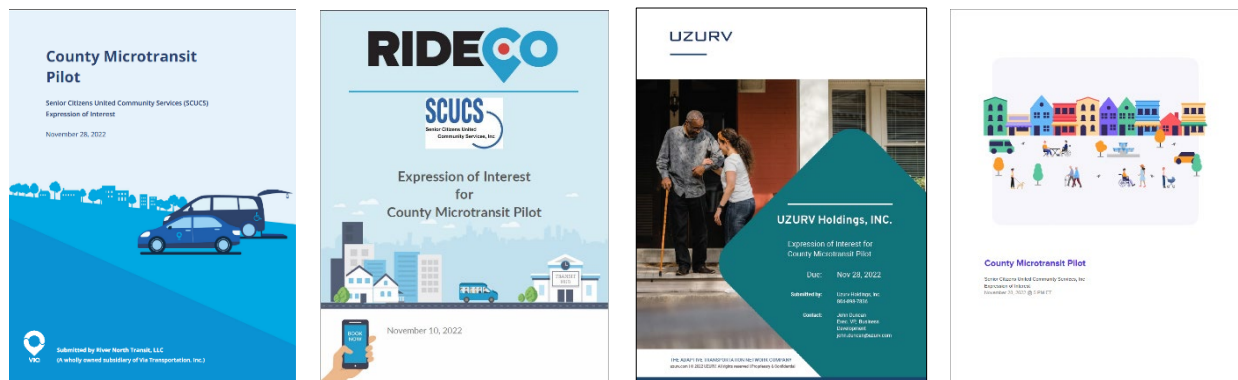**Pilot Expression of Interest**

In coordination with NJT, the study team prepared and SCUCS released an expression of interest (EOI) primarily to ascertain private partner interest in piloting a turnkey microtransit pilot in the Camden & Gloucester region to support the mobility needs of residents with disabilities

and older adults. The EOI informed interested parties that the microtransit pilot service has been envisioned as a partnership between Camden (lead partner) and Gloucester (support partner) counties with support from NJT. The contracted vendor would provide Camden and Gloucester counties with a turnkey, on-demand rideshare service for subsidized trips in an approved pilot service area, with the vendor expected to provide the following:

- Vehicles including maintenance, cleaning and inspection

- Drivers and driver training

- Customer Service & Sign-up

- Reservations, Routing, and Dispatching (RSD)

- Insurance

- Reporting & Data

- Project Management

Interested respondents were requested to provide detailed information related to vehicle and technology components, as well as partnership features. Notably, a total of four submissions were received:

Figure 2. Responses to Pilot Expression of Interest

To facilitate even review and evaluation of these EOI submissions, the study team developed an EOI assessment tool, that was employed by the Rutgers Team, NJT Local Programs staff, and Camden and Gloucester counties. Each EOI submission was reviewed by a minimum of three individuals. Collaboratively, the Rutgers and NJT teams, as well as the two partner counties, documented a variety of strengths and weaknesses with each submission. Notably, only one submission presented their offering as a true turnkey service and only one discussed the proposed study area size. A comparison table was prepared on various EOI criteria as addressed by the four respondent organizations as follows:

Table 4. Expression of Interest Response Comparison

Criteria	RiverNorth (Via)	RideCo	Uzurv	Spare Labs
Turnkey	Yes	No, no dedicated fleet	No, TNC model	No, no dedicated fleet. Assumes SCUCS will setup, run and monitor service
Pricing info	$65-$90/vehicle hour plus upfront costs. No charge for software upgrades/ refinement. Increasing costs over time (the greater of 5% or the last twelve months all-items U.S. CPI)	Charges based on # of vehicles in service at same time. Implementation & software licensing fee.	Estimate $4.00-$9.50 per trip to use their services PLUS a minimum variable fare of $11.00. It might be less if use their TNC.	Cost methodology is tiered and therefore geared towards the size of the service, principally the number of vehicles used or trips delivered
Service offered	Curb-to-curb, door-to-door, corner to corner	Curb-to-curb and flex stop preferred, door-to-door possible	Curb-to curb and Door-to-door	Door-to-door. Not well specified.
Startup Plan	Yes, 12 weeks	Yes, 12 weeks	Not mentioned	Not specified, but say can start in as little as 48 hours
Scalable	Yes	Not mentioned	Yes, but won't result in cost savings	Yes, implied from pricing info
Data ownership	Via retains ownership. Partners can use data.	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
Service planning	Yes. Service design offered.	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Yes
Service hours	Yes, plus Sunday	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
Driver background checks	Yes	Not mentioned	Yes, by a third party	Not mentioned
Service region review	Yes, they recommended reducing size of service area	Discuss trade-offs between low wait times, low on-board times, or budget	Yes, acknowledge proposed service area	Not mentioned
Marketing plan	Yes	Limited discussion	Would provide assistance to SCUCS	Not mentioned
Training	Yes, in-person and online	Vague	Yes	Yes
Vehicle branding	Yes	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned

Criteria	RiverNorth (Via)	RideCo	Uzurv	Spare Labs
Payment options	Yes, including cash & vouchers, promotional codes	Yes, including cash	Yes, credit/debit, cash	Yes, credit/debit
App features	Many	Many	Many	Many
Trip notification features	Many	Yes	Yes	Not mentioned
Call center	Yes	Assumes SCUCS would operate	Yes. Multilingual. Also, riders can pay w CC via call center.	Available via 3rd party
Works with 3rd party apps	Yes	Yes	Yes, scheduling software. No mention of payment apps	Not mentioned
No show policies	Yes, offered options to use during pilot	Yes	Yes, fee for cancellations within 2 hours of pickup	Not mentioned
WAV vehicles	Yes	Vague	Contracted as necessary	Mentioned
Vehicle maintenance	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Mention vehicle standards & inspections	Not mentioned
Pre-trip inspections	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Drivers conduct	Not mentioned
Drug/alcohol testing	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Yes, only TNC with FTA compliant drivers	Not mentioned
Major Takeaways	Only turnkey response; well respected & experienced. Already operating in NJ.	Well respected, but not turnkey	TNC model	Primarily a tech provider

MOVING FORWARD: NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, the Rutgers team will be extending their work to advance this planning study into full pilot implementation. The pilot objective is to implement a cost effective microtransit service pilot that is technology-enabled to support an accessible, on-demand, customer-focused, shared-ride program in Camden and Gloucester counties to provide inter-county trips for residents of both counties with disability and older adults. Enhancing regional mobility for persons with disabilities and older adult residents by expanding opportunities for inter-county trips through a public-private partnership that leverages private sector technology and public paratransit operations is the ultimate goal.

The Rutgers team will first focus efforts on supporting the Request for Proposal (RFP) process and provider selection. Review of the EOI submissions has provided the Rutgers team, NJT,

and county partners with valuable information to help craft the most appropriate RFP. The RFP will seek specificity about responsibilities of all partner roles; detail on level of partner operational support; as well as data ownership and pricing. Proposals will also need to demonstrate operational capacity in the service area specified.

Other key tasks moving forward will focus on developing a marketing plan and materials for pilot launch, and leading the pilot evaluation effort. The former task will focus on collaborating with Camden County and Gloucester County partners and the service provider to develop a menu of marketing materials to foster awareness and usage of the pilot microtransit service that will include both traditional and digital community outreach. The pilot evaluation task will encompass establishing pilot performance measures, convening several rounds of interviews with the county partners and service partner throughout the duration of the pilot, and conducting a survey and focus group with pilot passengers.