



The Best Deal in New York City: MTA's Access-A-Ride

The numbers are nothing short of astounding. Every day, more than 8 million people board the buses, subway cars and commuter trains of the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Every day, 30 percent of all transit rides in the country are provided on the MTA system. In three days, the MTA provides more service than Amtrak does in a year. In 10 weeks, the MTA transports more people than all domestic airlines offer in a year.

By Scott Bogren

From the trains of the Long Island Railroad and Metro North to the ubiquitous subway stations and gleaming silver subway cars to the thousands of buses on the streets of the five boroughs, public transit in New York City seems everywhere. And within this enormous transit network, there is ongoing growth in transit demand. In fact, ridership is up, system-wide, 38 percent since 1996.

For the MTA's Access-A-Ride demand-response system, tremendous growth — even exceeding that of the rest of the system — has been the rule since its inception and will be so for the foreseeable future. It's a commitment that the people of New York have made to their less-mobile neighbors and as many in the city

say, at \$2 a ride, it's the best deal in New York City.

The busy streets of the five boroughs that make up New York City — Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx — are a more than challenging environment in which to provide an efficient demand-response transit service. Traffic throughout the area is tremendous with heavy congestion always a possibility.

“Yes, it's a challenge here,” says Thomas Charles, MTA's Vice President heading up the Paratransit Division. “There are so many mitigating factors that we have to keep an eye on. All it takes is one accident, or the UN being in session, for example, to change your entire operations. But we have the staff and carriers who can manage all this and provide great service.”

Access-A-Ride: A Significant Commitment

The MTA, since taking over Access-A-Ride in 1993 from the New York City Department of Transportation, has made a significant commitment to ensuring the mobility of everyone in the five boroughs. In mid-March (while *Community Transportation Magazine* staff was present working on this article) the system broke its daily ridership record with 18,000 trips in a single day.

“A safe and efficient service is — and always has been — our priority,” says Charles.

There is no better illustration of the MTA's commitment to this vital service all around New York City than the fact that once a rider has met the system's eligibility process there will be no trip denials.

“Our interpretation of the Americans with Disabilities Act is that it calls for zero trip denials and the fact

that we don't deny any trips to eligible riders is a source of great pride to all of us at Access-A-Ride,” says Paratransit Division Customer Relations Officer Carol Zwick.

The Access-A-Ride's extensive service is provided everyday through contracts with 13 carriers — both for profit and nonprofit organizations alike — who operate the omnipresent vehicles. Each carrier serves a specific role in the operation — single borough, inter-borough, overnight, etc. The largest of the carriers operate more than 200 buses and employ hundreds of drivers.

Access-A-Ride service is so thorough throughout the city that the system has developed a real innovation: paratransit bus stops. At key areas in all five boroughs — like, for instance, Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan — Access-A-Ride bus stop signs are plainly evident and riders need only wait there to be picked up.

Trip reservations are handled by a call center at Access-A-Ride's Long Island City headquarters in Queens that is operated by First Transit and that receives 10,000 calls a day and has 500 employees. The trips are then sent out to one of the 13 carriers, who provide the actual transit service.

But all in Long Island City are clear: “Our service is part of the MTA,” says Charles. “We don't want anyone here saying, ‘hey, it's the carriers,’... no, it's the MTA.”

To help ensure that the residents of the Big Apple understand that Access-A-Ride is part of the region's enormous transit network and the MTA, each of the system's 1,800 vehicles is adorned with the system's ubiquitous blue strip on white color scheme. And the training and

requirements of Access-A-Ride's carrier's drivers are identical to those of the MTA's fixed-route operators. “We're a very real part of the MTA service,” says Charles. “We have a lot of support from the MTA and they regularly tell us how important the work we do is.”



Aldo Martelli heads up one of Access-A-Ride's key functions: Standards and Compliance. Contract oversight is expertly handled by Access-A-Ride.

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Managing the Growth

The demand for Access-A-Ride's service is rapidly expanding with little let up in sight. Every aspect of the service has experienced dramatic growth. Since 1998, Access-A-Ride registration is up 170 percent, trips requested are up 233 percent, trips scheduled are up 306 percent and vehicles in operation are up 428 percent. By 2010, the agency expects annual rides to go from 3.9 million last year to 7.5 million — a more than 90 percent increase. Similarly, Access-A-Ride expects registrants for the service to go from 97,000 last year to 135,000 in 2010. Clearly, managing the growth in the most efficient and cost-effective manner is a steep challenge before the Access-A-Ride leadership.

"Double digit growth has been the rule around here, and it shows no sign of stopping," says Charles. "We know this, and we know it's going to be a challenge to us — but we can handle it and so have our carriers."

The context for the growth trajectory for Access-A-Ride is an MTA that

is highly accessible. All fixed-route buses in the MTA fleet have been wheelchair lift-equipped since 1996. Key subway station accessibility is an ongoing commitment. But the age of the subway system — in some areas more than a century old! — presents a barrier to complete accessibility and virtually eliminates its feasibility as the primary mover of people with disabilities and seniors. Access-A-Ride has to do more than connect riders with the underground.

The eligibility process for Access-A-Ride is handled with independent contractors in each of the five boroughs certifying eligible riders. A prospective rider calls a toll-free phone number and is given an appointment, and a ride, to an eligibility certifier. The entire process takes no more than 21 days. Some riders are given partial eligibility based on available accessible transit service in certain areas of the city, weather and other factors. For a rider granted continual eligibility, the certification is for five years, at which point the rider's information will be checked. Last

year, a third of the system's riders used a wheelchair.

"Our certifiers are medical professionals — generally physical or occupational therapists — who look over the applications and where appropriate, perform functional assessments including a rider's ability to navigate steps," says Zwick.

The nature of the Access-A-Ride customers, also, dictates how the service operates. In addition to the regular double-digit growth the system is experiencing, more than half of the trips are now for non-emergency medical transportation — and perhaps not surprisingly, the fastest growing ridership group are those aged 75+.

Today, Access-A-Ride enjoys an 80 percent customer satisfaction rating, according to internal surveying and focus groups. The agency is promoting its subscription service which is up in terms of usage more than 20 percent from the previous year.

“Most of these subscription riders are heading to work,” says Zwick. “We want to promote subscription riders as much as we can to quell demand at the call center.”

Weekend service is another area where Access-A-Ride is experiencing dramatic growth. Last year, weekend service saw a 150 percent increase and officials with the operation expect that number to grow again this year.

Contrary to what many might believe, a lack of mobility causes isolation across New York City's five boroughs — even in arguably the nation's most densely populated neighborhoods with a significant amount of transit service available.

“Later today, I'm going out to make a presentation to a senior center in Brooklyn,” says Access-A-Ride's Outreach and Public Information Coordinator Russell Schmid. “And I'm certain that some in the audience will literally have their lives changed by our service being available to them, it happens every time.”

Last year, Access-A-Ride held nearly 200 such presentations around the city, each designed to familiarize people with the system's service and registration process.

“People absolutely can be isolated in New York City,” says Charles. “Most of our riders are pretty frail and winters here can be real tough.”

Necessary Oversight

On a bright sunny early spring day at the Rusk Institute for Rehabilitative Medicine in mid-town Manhattan, a steady stream of small buses all painted white with a blue stripe arrive and depart like incoming airplanes stacked up above a busy airport.

“We average 14 vehicles an hour to this facility,” says Access-A-Ride's Director of Transportation for the Paratransit Division, Gary Schiavone.

Schiavone works in Access-A-Ride's Standards and Compliance Office, conducting driver training and contract compliance on the part of the operation's 13 contract carriers



Russell Schmid (l.) and Gray Schiavone, making sure Access-A-Ride carriers provide outstanding service.

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Ray Perez (c.) and two of his colleagues at Maggie's Paratransit, one of Access-A-Ride's carriers.



Thomas Charles is the MTA Vice-President in charge of Access-A-Ride.

which provide the transit service for Access-A-Ride. The system operates an active compliance department that looks into all aspects of the service it is contracting for every day.

"Our service is so large and extensive that the oversight function has to be everywhere," says Aldo Martelli, who heads up Standards and Compliance for Access-A-Ride. "If we weren't keeping such good track of the service, it would all get away from us pretty quickly – it's just too big to handle any other way."

At Rusk, a key component in the oversight function is readily apparent. Tyrone Johnson, one of the agency's superintendents approaches each of the vehicles carrying a clipboard and with a sharp eye. He evaluates each vehicle and driver – regardless of the carrier – on such criteria as driver and vehicle appearance, seatbelt usage, and whether or not standard Access-A-Ride policies are being followed. Drivers or carriers who violate Access-A-Ride's standards, as exhibited by the collected supervisory observations, are typically sent to training.

"We use this process as a way to ensure the quality of our service, and we make sure the carriers know it's not a punitive measure, but a training one," says Schiavone. "We make sure the carriers do what they say they're going to do, and that all our riders are properly registered."

The oversight process includes more than 400 observations a day in the five boroughs, each of which is collected and analyzed in Long Island City. It also involves at least one undercover ride by most members of the Standards and Compliance Office everyday.

"We make sure the vehicles are properly maintained, that everyone with the carriers are regularly and properly trained, that they are insured," says Martelli. "We need to make sure they're in compliance with the contract."

The View from a Carrier

Maggie's Paratransit in Brooklyn is one of Access-A-Ride's largest carriers with 220 buses serving the entire metropolitan area and with the contract to operate the overnight transportation — a contract they've had since 2001. The carrier has

devoted its operation entirely to Access-A-Ride and the familiar white and blue Access-A-Ride vehicles with "Maggie's" written along the side are neatly tucked into every possible indoor parking area in the carrier's garage.

On this cool afternoon with a late winter storm approaching, a number of drivers gather at the dispatch office to pick up their run sheets for the afternoon shift. Routine maintenance is underway on a number of buses as are body repairs on a vehicle involved in a collision. The garage is bustling with activity.

"We have an outstanding partnership with the MTA," says Ray Perez of Maggie's. "They're tough but fair."

In recent months, Access-A-Ride developed a test program with Maggie's where special cameras — or Drive Cams — have been installed in vehicles to record how the vehicle is being operated. Already, the cameras have revealed that in a recent accident, Maggie's driver had acted properly and was struck at a traffic signal while stopped.

“The cameras are helpful to us as both a training tool and to actually safeguard the drivers,” says Schiavone.

With the exception of two new modified vans, every vehicle in Maggie’s fleet — and for that matter, the Access-A-Ride fleet — is a Ford chassis cutaway-type vehicle built in Penn Yan, New York (in the state’s famed Finger Lakes region) by Coach and Equipment. The agency enjoys a great working relationship with Coach and Equipment as well as a unique 5 year/100,000 mile warranty on its buses.

“The better the vehicle, the better the service,” says Charles. “Our

passengers need a comfortable, reliable vehicle and this bus gives it to them. We buy lots of vehicles with a service our size and we use that clout.”

As part of its oversight function, Martelli’s team watches over the Access-A-Ride vehicles as they are built. “We watch over everything, from the wiring to the hoses, front to back, to make sure they meet our standards,” he says.

Demand-Response: New York Style

Amidst all of the astounding service operated by the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority, not to mention the

amazing ridership figures, it might be easy to overlook the city’s Access-A-Ride demand-response service. But to do so would be a mistake.

The commitment made by the MTA to New York City residents who cannot access the buses, subways and commuter trains it operates is just as astounding as the rest of the service it operates — as is the commitment by the Access-A-Ride staff and carriers to serve everyone.

“We take pride in our work and we know that our riders depend on our buses in so many important ways,” says Charles.

At Maggie’s Paratransit in Brooklyn, Access-A-Ride buses are readied for the overnight shift.

