

## History of Hall Area Transit's Transition From Dial-A-Ride and Gainesville Connection to WeGo Microtransit Service & Gainesville Downtown Trolley Service

In the mid-1970s, Hall Area Transit staff launched *Dial-A-Ride* as its countywide demand response service. Nearly three decades later in 1999, the *Red Rabbit* (later renamed *Gainesville Connection*) debuted as the community's fixed-route bus service. For years, staff increased routes, redesigned logos, changed names, reduced fares and launched several promotional events, all in an effort to expand ridership, but the unique geography, topography and low density of the area had always made the delivery of public transit a particularly challenging proposition.

When microtransit companies like Uber and Lyft made their United States debut in the early 2000s, it was passengers in large bustling cities like New York and Los Angeles that latched on to the new service that featured sleek vehicles and easy-to-use mobile apps powered by computer algorithms to quickly move them from point A to B. In 2018, staff from Hall Area Transit and the Gainesville-Hall County Metropolitan Organization (GHMPO) evaluated several proposals to assess the effectiveness of microtransit in our community. By the spring of 2020, a contract was awarded to Via to unite its proprietary software with Hall Area Transit drivers and vehicles to create *WeGo Powered by Via*. After the public/private partnership launched in December 2020, staff began comparing the three services and quickly calculated that that WeGo was outperforming Dial-A-Ride and Gainesville Connection in every key performance indicator.

In June, Hall Area Transit staff hosted three in-person and three virtual public hearings to address the following proposed service changes:

1. Terminate Dial-A-Ride effective June 30, 2021
2. Terminate Gainesville Connection effective June 30, 2021
3. Expand WeGo from Gainesville to the balance of Hall County effective July 1, 2021
4. Create a Downtown & Special Event Trolley Service (fixed route) effective July 1, 2021

Staff received over 20 public comments. While public hearing participants were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the WeGo service features, a few expressed concern over the increase in fare from \$1 for Gainesville Connection to \$3 for WeGo. To address this matter, staff created a new fare table effective July 1 wherein WeGo trips 5 miles or less will cost just \$2 and longer trips will cost 50 cents for every additional mile. Given that the average passenger travels 3.3 miles/trip, the average passenger fee will be \$2. Provided below is a summary of staff actions taken to ensure a fair and equitable process to evaluate the impact of the proposed service changes.

- 1) Cost Comparison of Dial-A-Ride, Gainesville Connection and WeGo.
- 2) The public notice was published in *The Gainesville Times*. Flyers were posted on all transit vehicles and placed in city/county administrative buildings as well as the transit station itself. Additionally, the notice and flyers were distributed to organizations who then forwarded them via their list-serves to more than 300 nonprofit, business and government entities.
- 3) Newspaper and radio featured stories highlighting the proposed staff changes.
- 4) Agendas and comment cards were provided to all meeting attendees.
- 5) The community was invited to join six public hearings June 2-3. The first three hearings were in-person gatherings located in a safe open-air environment in front of the transit administrative building. The remaining three were virtual hearings held on Zoom. Individuals who could not attend the sessions were invited to share their comments via mail or email. After gathering all comments, staff methodically examined each one and offered remedies where there was potential harm to one or more groups.
- 6) A *WeGo PowerPoint Presentation* including a *Summary of Key Performance Indicators* was made available to organizations that desired additional background information on the program.

- 7) A spreadsheet comparing features of each service including ADA Requirements was made available to public hearing attendees.
- 8) A spreadsheet summarizing the disposition of transit vehicles was provided.

Hall Area Transit staff presented this information to Georgia Department of Transportation staff and received approval to move forward with the service changes effective July 2020.