

## MEETING MINUTES

### LOCAL COORDINATING BOARD FOR THE TRANSPORTATION DISADVANTAGED of the COLLIER METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION PUBLIC WORKSHOP

Collier County Government Center  
Building "F", Information Technology Training Room  
3299 Tamiami Trail East

Naples, FL 34112

March 1, 2023

1:30 p.m.

#### 1. CALL TO ORDER

##### A. Roll Call

**Chair Pernas** called the public workshop to order at approximately 1:30 p.m.

**Chair Pernas** introduced himself.

**Ms. Siegler** called roll and confirmed that a quorum was present in the room.

##### Members Present

Tony Pernas, MPO Board member, Everglades City, LCB Chair  
Rick Hart, Disabled, LCB Vice-Chair  
Dylan Vogel, Citizens Advocate/User  
Gabrielle Galanti, Local Medical Community  
Leah Watson, Agency for Persons with Disabilities  
Lilith Sileika, Veterans Services  
Sarah Gualco, Area Agency on Aging SWFL-FL Dept. of Elder Affairs

##### Members Absent

Anne Chernin, Elderly  
Brett Nelson, Children at Risk  
Cheryl Burnham, Florida Association for Community Action  
Dale Hanson, Florida Dept. of Transportation  
Eileen Streight, Citizens Advocate/Non-User  
Michael Stahler, Florida Agency for Health Care Administration  
Robert Richards, Florida Dept. of Education, Div. of Voc. Rehab.  
Tabitha Larrauri, Florida Department of Children and Family Services

##### MPO Staff

Anne McLaughlin, Executive Director  
Sean Kingston, Principal Planner

Dusty Siegler, Administrative Assistant

**Others Present**

Adrienne Welsh

Connor Nehls, Enrollment & Volunteer Manger, STARability Foundation

Dani Cohen, Program Specialist, STARability Foundation

Dianne Price

Michelle Edwards-Arnold, Director, Collier County PTNE

Elena Ortiz-Rosado, Marketing Manager, Collier Area Transit

Mark Moujabber, General Manager, Collier Area Transit

Omar DeLeon, Public Transit Manager, Collier Area Transit

Mari Maldonado, Paratransit Manager, Collier Area Transit

Peter Spisak, Harmonia The Club

Reggie Wilson, Collier Dept. of Health

**B. Pledge of Allegiance**

Chair Pernas led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance.

**2. APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA**

*Ms. Watson moved for approval of the annual public workshop agenda. Mr. Hart seconded. Passed unanimously.*

**3. ANNUAL PUBLIC WORKSHOP ON LOCAL TRANSPORTATION DISADVANTAGED (TD) PROGRAM AND PROCESS**

**A. Public Comments on Local TD Program and Process**

**Ms. Price** stated that she has a son in STARability who attends the Trailblazer Academy, and she also volunteers at STARability. Ms. Price indicated that a few weeks prior, CATConnect (Collier Area Transit paratransit service) was supposed to pick up one of her colleagues between 10:30 and 11 a.m. Ms. Price and her colleague waited until 11:10 a.m., and then Ms. Price drove her colleague home. CATConnect showed up around 11:15 a.m., but Ms. Price and her colleague did not know that the bus was on its way. Ms. Price expressed concern about unreliability of service. **Ms. Arnold** encouraged Ms. Price and her colleague to call CAT's office to arrange to get the rideCATconnect app. The app includes daily announcements now. CAT was having difficulty with a previous system vendor in terms of getting accurate announcements. The app allows users to track the location of the buses, schedule and cancel trips, and receive notifications of when the bus is on its way.

**Ms. Price** indicated that she submitted a form to CAT for her son to have paratransit service, and she has not heard back. **Ms. Maldonado** confirmed that the application was received, and that she would check on the status and follow up with Ms. Price. Typically, the application process takes approximately 21 days.

**Ms. Welsh** stated that she is a caregiver for her sister, who is in the STARability program and uses paratransit services. Ms. Welsh just found out about the rideCATconnect app a few weeks ago. Ms. Welsh suggested that CAT communicate the availability of the app to paratransit users. Ms. Welsh indicated that, prior to the app, there was a lot of variability in times that the paratransit service was set to arrive - her sister sometimes had to wait for an hour. Ms. Welsh expressed concern about other disabled individuals who may have to wait for a long period of time to be picked up. Ms. Welsh also suggested that CAT hire additional staff, particularly to staff CAT's phone lines. Ms. Welsh would like to provide her feedback on the app once it has been used. **Ms. Arnold** responded that Ms. Welsh's feedback on the app be emailed to CAT, and **Mr. DeLeon** provided an email address. **Ms. Arnold** confirmed that CAT is short-staffed in terms of dispatching and drivers. CAT is receiving more applications and more trips are being requested; trips are currently exceeding pre-COVID pandemic levels. CAT is trying to increase its capacity in terms of drivers and buses. Traffic, low staff, and increasing trips are impacting CAT's wait times. **Ms. Welsh** suggested that the app should have two-way communication to alleviate the amount of phone calls to CAT. **Ms. Arnold** indicated that most phone calls CAT receives are to find out where a bus is located, which use of the app should alleviate.

**Ms. Watson** indicated that education is key, and STARability often allows community groups to do presentations. Ms. Watson wondered if CAT could provide a presentation to STARability regarding the paratransit service. **Ms. Arnold** responded that CAT would like to do so when staff has the ability. CAT has been working on public outreach to provide information. **Mr. DeLeon** added that CAT recently attended a senior expo in North Naples, and did informational outreach at Goodlette Arms, an expo for children with disabilities, and some schools.

**Mr. Nehls** commented that STARability would love to have CAT provide an informational presentation. Mr. Nehls indicated that he understands that CAT is short-staffed; STARability is short-staffed as well. Many of STARability's participants utilize the paratransit system. Without the paratransit system, most participants would not be able to attend STARability's programs. **Mr. Spisak** agreed and thanked CAT for its hard work. **Ms. Maldonado** indicated that CAT could provide a presentation and information. **Mr. Nehls** indicated that such a session would be helpful; there are some families that are new to STARability who do not have experience with paratransit.

**Mr. Hart** stated that he works at Lighthouse of Collier, which depends heavily on the paratransit system for its blind and visually impaired clients. Mr. Hart expressed that the paratransit system is a good system that works well for the most part. In season, it can be difficult. Lighthouse of Collier tries to not schedule paratransit rides during peak times (before 9 a.m. or after 3 p.m.), if possible. Lighthouse of Collier tries to coordinate its schedule around paratransit service availability as much as possible. **Ms. Arnold** added that Lighthouse has the flexibility to try to schedule around peak times, but some agencies do not. CAT tries to work with paratransit users who do not have programs or time commitments to see if they would be flexible to schedule their service during off-peak times.

**Ms. Welsh** asked what the public could do to assist CAT with getting the appropriate resources it needs for staffing and planning for future growth in demand, or otherwise help CAT improve its paratransit service. **Ms. Arnold** responded that CAT's biggest current challenge is

staffing. When CAT goes to the Board of County Commissioners with requests for funding to support hiring additional staff, it would be helpful to have public support. The public can attend the meetings or write their commissioner. There is a current challenge with finding employees, particularly bus drivers. Paratransit bus drivers are more than just drivers and must be sensitive to the needs of the population that the paratransit system caters to. CATConnect has wonderful and attentive bus drivers now, but not enough of them. **Ms. Price** asked if CAT performs background checks on its drivers, and **Ms. Arnold** confirmed that high-level background checks are performed on all drivers.

**B. Member Comments on Local TD Program and Process**

None.

**C. Annual TD LCB Training**

**Ms. McLaughlin** introduced herself and MPO staff and **Ms. Arnold** introduced herself and key CAT staff. Ms. McLaughlin provided an informational training presentation (which was included in the agenda packet), with input from Ms. Arnold.

**4. ADJOURN ANNUAL PUBLIC WORKSHOP**

*With no further comments, **Chair Pernas** adjourned the public workshop at approximately 2:38 p.m.*