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
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 Manager, 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**


**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.