



**Transportation Disadvantaged Local Coordinating Board (TDLCB) Meeting**

Marion County Growth Services Training Room

1101 SW 20<sup>th</sup> Ct., Ocala, FL 34471

September 12, 2024

10:00 AM

**MINUTES**

**Members Present:**

Matthew McClain

Jeffrey Askew

Gisela Ruiz

Tiffany McKenzie

Tracey Sapp (*Nicole Brickhouse attended on behalf of Tracey*)

Susan Hanley (*arrived at 10:05am*)

Jeannette Estes (*Elizabeth Watson attended on behalf of Jeannette*)

Andrea Melvin

Anissa Pieriboni

Steven Neal (*Tom Duncan attended on behalf of Steven*)

Donnie Mitchell

Carlos Colon

Christopher Carlisle

**Members Not Present:**

Iris Pozo

Angela Juaristic

Elizabeth Alacci

**Others Present:**

Liz Mitchell, TPO

Rob Balmes, TPO

Shakayla Irby, TPO

Sara Brown, TPO

Tom Duncan, City of Ocala  
Clayton Murch, Marion Senior Services Herman  
Schultz, Marion Senior Services  
Karen Williams, Marion Senior Services Joseph  
Bartolomeo, Marion Senior Services Councilman  
James Hilty, City of Ocala Commissioner  
Michelle Stone, Marion County Jim East  
Barbara Gilbert  
Joseph Lopez  
Other attendees not signed in.

### **Item 1. Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance**

Chairman Matthew McClain called the meeting to order at 10:08am and led the board members in the Pledge of Allegiance.

### **Item 2. Roll Call**

Secretary Shakayla Irby called the roll and a quorum was present.

### **Item 3. Proof of Publication**

Secretary Shakayla Irby stated that the meeting had been published September 5, 2024 online on the TPO website and Facebook and Twitter pages, the City of Ocala, Belleview, and Dunnellon websites. The meeting was also published to the September 5, 2024 edition of the Ocala Star Banner.

### **Item 4A. Commissioner Stone Award**

Before proceeding with the agenda, Chairman McClain presented an award to former Chair Commissioner Michelle Stone. Commissioner Stone had served as chair of the board for six years, guiding the board with dedication and passion. The award recognized her significant contributions and thanked her for her service to the board.

Commissioner Stone expressed her gratitude for the award and thanked Commissioner McClain for his leadership. She reflected on her time with the board, noting how much she enjoyed the meaningful work and emphasized that there is still much to be done. Commissioner Stone highlighted the importance of the board's ongoing efforts to improve Marion County, acknowledging the dedication of everyone involved. She also praised Commissioner McClain for his commitment to understanding the community's needs as he continues his role.

In closing, Commissioner Stone offered her support to the board and thanked everyone for the recognition, stating she was touched by the gesture and would proudly display the award.

## **Item 4B. SunTran Annual Report**

Tom Duncan, the new Transit Administrator for the City of Ocala, presented an overview of the transit system's annual report and key projects.

### **Key Points:**

#### **1. TDP Goals and Implementation Plan:**

- Focus on environment, equity, accessibility, usability, and efficiency.
- Projects include:
  - Downtown circulator with an electric trolley.
  - Low-emission grant project.
  - Building renovation and triennial review.
  - Downtown transfer station and bus stop shelter improvements.
  - Enhancements to route efficiency and service extension to Marion Oaks.
  - Micro transit implementation, akin to Uber/Lyft but with shared rides.

#### **2. Low-Emission Project:**

- Secured \$16.2 million for 26 electric vans and 5 electric buses.
- Infrastructure and maintenance facility upgrades to support new vehicles.
- Initial focus on Sunday micro transit as a pilot program.

#### **3. Facility and Maintenance Improvements:**

- Rehabilitation of existing maintenance facility.
- Added bays for electric vehicle maintenance.
- FTA and FDOT reviews completed with recommendations addressed.

#### **4. Downtown Transfer Station Improvements:**

- Addition of restroom facilities and a ticketing kiosk.
- Construction expected to start late this year or early next year.
- Installation of 23 new bus stop shelters at high-volume stops.

#### **5. Performance Indicators:**

- Noted past ridership declines and recent improvements following route realignment.
- Ongoing efforts to improve headways and service frequency.

#### **6. Next Steps:**

- Continued work on downtown circulator, bus shelter projects, and federal and state funding grants.

Tom Duncan's presentation highlighted ongoing and upcoming projects aimed at improving public transit in Ocala, focusing on sustainability, efficiency, and user experience.

Ms. Barbara Gilbert expressed appreciation for the presentation, mentioning that while areas like Pinellas County, Hillsborough County, and the Tampa Bay region rely heavily on public transportation, she recently visited Saint Petersburg and observed that despite heavy interstate traffic, the city streets were clean, safe, and traffic-free.

Mr. Duncan acknowledged the citizen's concerns and emphasized that as Ocala and Marion County continue to grow, the plan will expand to include more improvements for handicapped transportation. He highlighted the partnership with Marion Senior Services to meet ADA

requirements and ensure accessibility for all new bus shelters being installed. He also noted that this development was a key focus for SunTran, the local transit system.

The citizen pointed out that in many areas within the city limits where she resides, there are no sidewalks to provide access to bus stops for people like her, raising concerns about pedestrian accessibility for those with disabilities.

Mr. Duncan acknowledged the concern and stated that the city is aware of the challenge regarding sidewalk accessibility. He mentioned that improvements are being made in that area. He also noted that building codes now require sidewalks to be included as part of any new construction or significant property improvements, ensuring better pedestrian access in the future.

The citizen recounted a conversation with a city engineer approximately three to four years ago regarding the addition of a lane to 36th Avenue. The engineer had promised that a sidewalk would be built extending from 21st Street to Silver Springs Boulevard. However, this sidewalk was never constructed. The citizen highlighted the absence of sidewalks in her development and the surrounding areas, despite them being within walking distance to Silver Springs Boulevard. She had anticipated using a \$3,000 handicap scooter on this sidewalk, which remains unused in her garage due to the lack of infrastructure.

Mr. Duncan acknowledged the challenge of connectivity and mentioned that the TPO has a multi-use plan, which includes provisions for bicycles and pedestrians. He noted that this plan is open to the public and that they are always seeking input on it. He offered that the TPO could provide additional information on the plan.

She noted that Marion Senior Services is currently partnered for ADA requirements and bus shelters are being made accessible. However, she raised concerns about the lack of sidewalks in many city areas, particularly in her own neighborhood. She recounted a conversation with a city engineer from a few years ago, who had promised a sidewalk along 36th Avenue from 21st Street to Silver Springs Boulevard, which has yet to be built. The lack of sidewalks prevents her from using a handicap scooter she purchased, which remains unused in her garage.

The citizen emphasized the need for long-term planning, suggesting that transportation infrastructure should consider future needs over the next 50 years. She highlighted the projected increase in blindness among Americans due to various blinding diseases, with a significant rise expected in the coming decades. She shared personal experiences about the lack of adequate transportation for blind individuals, including her own step-grandsons and the broader blind community in Ocala, which covers eight counties. The citizen noted that the local transportation system, Marion Transit, has limited services for blind individuals, often only providing transportation once every seven weeks, which is insufficient for regular support group meetings. She stressed the importance of improving transportation to better serve those who are blind and to support their emotional well-being.

#### **Item 5A. Annual Operating Report (AOR)**

The TPO staff regularly reviews and approves the Annual Operating Report (AOR) to ensure compliance with State of Florida regulations related to the operations of the Florida Coordinated

Transportation System. The Commission uses these forms to gather information necessary to accurately reflect each CTC's operating data, provide a statewide operational profile of the Florida Coordinated Transportation System, and evaluate specific performance aspects of the coordinated systems both individually and collectively.

Mr. Clayton Murch, Marion Transit Transportation Director and Community Transportation Coordinator, presented the Annual Operating Report, which assesses Marion Senior Services, Marion Transit, and related coordination contracts. He highlighted that the report includes data on both deviated fixed routes and paratransit services.

He noted a general increase in service usage, reflecting growing needs and changing client circumstances. However, challenges remain due to limited bus availability and funding, impacting the ability to meet all transportation demands. The report also detailed the distribution of trips for various purposes, including medical, educational, and daily living needs, emphasizing ongoing efforts to balance these services effectively.

Chairman McClain inquired about the significant increase in the "life sustaining" trips category. He noted the large jump in that specific area and asked if there was an explanation or any particular factors contributing to this change.

Mr. Murch explained that the increase in the "life sustaining" trips category is part of a comprehensive accounting process that includes all coordination contractors and Bridge to Hope. He attributed the rise to growth and shifting dynamics but did not have a more detailed explanation at that time. He also noted that Bridge to Hope had influenced the overall trip data.

Mr. Murch provided insights into the sources of funding for trips, including contributions from the Commission for Transportation Disadvantaged and other sources. He detailed the increases in trips handled by Marion Transit and coordination contractors, as well as the impact of expanded service areas and population growth on mileage.

He discussed the current vehicle and driver statistics, including the addition of staff from Bridge to Hope. Performance improvements were noted, with reductions in accidents and costs per trip, despite increases in expenses related to fuel and vehicle maintenance. The adjustments in service areas and proximity to SunTran routes have influenced overall costs.

Mr. Askew inquired about Bridge to Hope, asking for clarification on how to recognize their vehicles and understand their role. He sought information on how these vehicles are managed and what scheduling processes are in place for their services.

Mr. Murch explained that Bridge to Hope handles its own scheduling independently from Marion Transit. Marion Transit oversees their operations in the role of the Community Transportation Coordinator. Bridge to Hope is an independent entity, operating as an adult day training facility. Their vehicles are distinguished by their purple and green colors with their name Bridge of Hope on them. Recently, they were awarded additional funding for new buses through the 5310 funding through the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT).

Ms. Melvin made a motion to approve the Annual Operating Report (AOR). Mr. Askew seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously.

**Item 5B. Bylaws Update**

Ms. Mitchell stated that the TPO staff annually reviews and, if necessary, amends the TDLCB Bylaws to ensure alignment with Florida statutes, regulations, and codes. These Bylaws help guide the TDLCB in supporting Marion Transit as the Community Transportation Coordinator (CTC) in delivering quality service to the Transportation Disadvantaged (TD) community. After reviewing the Bylaws, it was determined that no changes were needed. Therefore, a request was made to approve them as they currently stand.

Ms. Pieriboni made a motion to approve the Bylaws. Mr. Mitchell seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously.

**Item 6. Consent Agenda**

Ms. Melvin motioned to approve the Consent Agenda. Ms. Watson seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

**Item 7. Subcommittee's Future Plans**

Ms. Mitchell explained that, in the previous meeting, the decision had been made to reassess and reorganize the subcommittees for clarity and efficiency. The proposal included forming two new subcommittees: The Health Affairs Subcommittee and the Community Affairs Subcommittee. Below is a summary of their purposes and roles:

**Health Affairs Subcommittee:**

- Focused on health and well-being issues within the County, including challenges related to accessibility, equity, and the environment.
- Advocated for others and brought issues to the committee for consideration or solutions.
- Provided informative materials such as articles, speakers, or flyers.
- Suggested ideas for educational projects.

**The Health Affairs Subcommittee would include the following agencies:**

Agency for Healthcare Administration  
Florida Department of Health  
Florida Department of Elder Affairs  
Department of Children and Families  
Agency for Persons with Disabilities  
Marion County Veterans Services  
Center for Independent Living  
Center for the Blind

## **Community Affairs Subcommittee**

- Addressed transit issues for disadvantaged and underserved communities, including challenges related to lighting, curbs, environmental obstructions, and bus shelters.
- Identified and resolved accessibility challenges.
- Kept the community informed about local events and opportunities to participate, volunteer, or show support.
- Suggested improvements and organizational changes for current and future issues.

### **The Community Affairs Subcommittee would include the following agencies:**

Central Florida Community Action Agency  
Housing Finance Authority  
Ocala Housing Authority  
CareerSource Citrus, Levy and Marion  
Marion County Public Schools  
Florida Department of Transportation  
SunTran Bus Services

Each subcommittee was to select a leader to oversee progress and guide meetings, which could be held in-person or virtually based on the group's preference. Subcommittee members were expected to meet quarterly before the TDLCB meetings to report findings, issues, and suggestions.

The goal was to advocate for the disadvantaged community, improving their quality of life and addressing their needs. The insights and information gathered were intended to contribute to the development of the 2025 Transportation Disadvantaged Service Plan (TDSP), creating a more accurate and comprehensive representation of the TD community.

Ms. Mitchell emphasized the importance of each member's role in gathering and communicating information to keep the committee informed and effective. With only four meetings a year, active participation was crucial for ensuring meaningful and impactful results.

Ms. McKenzie asked about the appointment of chairpersons for the committees.

Ms. Mitchell responded that the committees should convene to select a chairperson or leader, whether meeting in person or virtually, based on the members' convenience.

Ms. Mitchell also noted that at the meeting, a single person could report back on behalf of the committee.

The board members decided to meet briefly after the meeting to organize the subcommittee groups.

**Item 8. Comments by TDLCB Members** *There*

*were no comments by the TDLCB members.*

**Item 9. Comments by TPO Staff**

Rob Balmes, TPO Director shared progress on the 2050 Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), noting that a community workshop had been scheduled for September 18th at the C.F. Weber Center. The workshop, held from 5:00 to 7:30 PM, was open to the public and featured an open house format with brief presentations. Feedback from citizens and partners was deemed crucial at this stage, and individual meetings with stakeholders were conducted. Input on additional groups to engage was welcomed.

Mr. Balmes also discussed the "Safety Matters" education and awareness video series. He explained that the series, developed in collaboration with Marion County Public Relations Team and partner agencies, features testimonial-style videos highlighting the impacts of distracted driving. The goal is to create multiple videos on various topics. A video specifically addressing fatalities and serious injuries was played for the board and had be shared on the Marion County Facebook page. Mr. Balmes told the board to be on the lookout for more videos to follow.

**Item 10. Comments by Community Transportation Coordinator (CTC)**

Mr. Murch provided the following updates:

- **Incident Report:** There had been 31 days without vehicle incidents and 167 days injury free. The fleet consisted of 44 buses, with two new buses arriving the following week and three more soon after. A total of 15 new buses was expected by mid-next year.
- **Bus Condition:** Many buses had nearly 120,000 miles on them and were experiencing reliability issues. Increased maintenance costs were required to keep them operational.
- **Demand and Service:** Transportation disadvantaged trips had increased by almost 2,000 compared to the previous year, reflecting a rapid rise in demand. Efforts were ongoing to meet the growing service requests.
- **Funding and Grants:** A contract renewal with SunTran resulted in a slight increase in expenses. Additional grant funding was sought due to the finite nature of the TD fund, which had not seen an increase despite rising demand. An application for a 5310 grant had been submitted to help cover some of the additional trips, with a decision expected in October.
- **Challenges:** The organization faced challenges in keeping up with the increasing demand for transportation, particularly for dialysis clients and doctor's appointments, and worked to address these issues as effectively as possible.



### **Item 11. Public Comment**

Jim East, a resident of Citra introduced himself as a semi-retired professional with experience on multiple boards and expressed his hope to join the TDLCB soon.

He expressed interest in adopting practices from neighboring counties, such as allowing return trip scheduling and advance reservations, to enhance services. Mr. East acknowledged the board's long history and noted a lack of significant changes in the transportation model during his time in the county. He expressed a strong desire to collaborate with the board to improve the transportation system.

Ms. Barbara Gilbert, a resident of Ocala shared her experience, stating she moved to the area five years ago for better access to shopping but found it difficult due to the lack of sidewalks and safe transportation options for those with disabilities. As a client of the Florida Center for the Blind, she used to regularly attend meetings until transportation was cut off. She expressed disappointment in the community's failure to meet the needs of the handicapped, noting that she had felt trapped in her home for five years, only able to leave for medical appointments.

Ms. Gilbert also shared that her 83-year-old husband, who recently became disabled and had to quit his job, would now rely on public transportation. She expressed her deep love for Ocala but announced that she and her husband were planning to move to St. Petersburg due to its more robust public transportation system for the disabled. She highlighted the need for Marion Transit to receive more funding, drivers, and buses.

Ms. Gilbert spoke about the broader issues in Ocala, such as increasing traffic deaths and inadequate transportation services, making it unsafe and challenging for the handicapped to navigate. She emphasized the disparity in services between Ocala and places like St. Petersburg, where transportation for seniors and disabled individuals is far more accessible.

She concluded by discussing her ongoing work with blindness organizations and her personal experiences with the lack of insurance coverage for essential aids for the blind, despite her extensive medical background and involvement in the community. She stressed the need for empathy and more support for disabled individuals and urged the community to take action.

Mr. Joseph Lopez, a resident of Ocala, shared a negative experience with Marion Transit. He recounted an incident where a driver accidentally ran him into a mirror while he was on his way to the dentist, nearly damaging the mirror. Mr. Lopez, who moved from California three years ago, expressed concern that if no improvements are made, Marion Transit might face serious consequences. He emphasized that changes are necessary to prevent the service from deteriorating.

Chairman McClain expressed regret for his experience and thanked him for sharing his comments.

A citizen whose name was inaudible expressed concerns about Marion Transit. She suggested that Marion Transit gather passengers from SR 200 and transport them to a central location before continuing their trips. The citizen believed this approach would be more efficient, reduce unnecessary driving, and help alleviate traffic.

**Item 12. Adjournment**

Chairman McClain adjourned the meeting at 11:17 am.

Respectfully Submitted By:

Shakayla Irby, TPO Administrative Assistant