

SOLANO COUNTY PARATRANSIT 2008-2009 Grand Jury Report

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The 2008-2009 Solano County Grand Jury elected to investigate the Paratransit service available in Solano County.

ACTIONS TAKEN BY GRAND JURY

- Attended a Solano County Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs
- Attended a Paratransit Coordinating Council meeting
- Interviewed Transit Program Manager/Analyst
- Interviewed City of Fairfield Transit Manager
- Reviewed Fairfield and Suisun City Paratransit Program Overview
- Reviewed Informational Transit Brochures
- Reviewed Fairfield And Suisun Transit Passenger Phone Call Log: July 2008-April 2009
- Inspected a Paratransit Bus

BACKGROUND/SUMMARY

The Solano County Paratransit services have been provided since 1975. The requirement to meet the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) has been in effect since 1990. The buses currently in use accommodate 16 passengers: 12 passengers with standard seating and four with wheel chair positions. There are a total of 16 buses available, six are owned by the City of Fairfield and 10 are owned by the Solano Transportation Authority (STA). The contract for operation, service and maintenance of these vehicles is currently with MV Transportation, Inc.

To become eligible to use the Solano County Paratransit system, people have to qualify through completion of forms and doctor verification to become ADA-qualified. People desiring to use the service must complete an ADA Certification Application, available from Solano County Paratransit or the City of Fairfield's website. Once the application is completed and received by the City of Fairfield, the applicant may be contacted to verify information on the application or may be asked to attend an in-person assessment of their disability.

To commute within Solano County, the passenger must call to make arrangements to be picked up, state the time they need to arrive at their destination and provide the return trip information if needed. The passenger needs to be ready 15 minutes prior to the arranged pick-up time and if the bus is running late, allow 15 minutes after the scheduled pick-up time. When a passenger does not show up for a scheduled ride, transit staff sends a warning letter. If the same passenger does not show up as scheduled three times in one month, service can be suspended for 30 days. The buses travel throughout Solano County; however, if transportation is needed beyond the County, transfers to other systems must be arranged.

Grand Jury members obtained temporary permission to ride on a Paratransit vehicle. When attempting to schedule a pick-up, several obstacles arose. First, more than three minutes elapsed on hold before the dispatcher picked up the call. Second, another dispatcher's conversation could be heard, making it difficult to understand and arrange for transportation. Third, scheduling was difficult because the range of time given for pick-up and return exceeded five hours, which was unreasonable for this situation. The attempt to ride the system was aborted.

The Transit Manager subsequently arranged an off-site inspection of a Paratransit bus for the Grand Jury. The bus was completely ADA-compliant with seat belts for all passengers and a wheel chair lift. It was observed that no First-Aid kit was aboard and the driver did not carry current CPR certification. According to a driver of a Paratransit vehicle, First-Aid kits on vehicles and CPR-certification are no longer required. The driver stated that if a medical emergency arises, the policy is to call the Emergency Medical System (911). Drivers are required by the State of California to have an annual medical examination and are required to carry a card indicating their health level is adequate to perform driving duties. Drivers must also have a valid Class B license. The Grand Jury requested from the City of Fairfield Transit Manager the reason for the lack of First-Aid kits and the discontinuation of the CPR-requirement for drivers. At the time of this report, no answer has been received.

The inspected bus was one of four 2007 models. The remaining 12 are older buses that date back to 2002.

The Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs held on December 15, 2008, addressed issues from the December 4, 2007 hearing. The issues were:

- There is a need for more service and better coordination of Fairfield/Suisun Transit
- Requests made for more local service in Benicia
- Concerns about Dial-A-Ride/Solano Paratransit service including: late pick-ups, early pick-ups, long trips, shortened dialysis treatments

At the Paratransit Coordinating Council (PCC) meeting of March 20, 2009, several users of the Paratransit service were in attendance. Complaints voiced by users included: late pick-ups, missed pick-ups, no after-hours return call backs. As many of the rides are to medical appointments and scheduled classes, this necessitates on-time pick-ups. Complaints were also received about passengers left waiting for return rides. These same issues were addressed at the Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs.

Notice of the Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs and PCC meetings is handled by the STA. Meeting locations for PCC rotate throughout the County. According to the Transit Program Manager/Analyst, fliers are posted on the buses and other locations but not in the local newspapers.

According to complaints by users, communications between dispatch and passengers are lacking. One example is that if the after-hours phone number is used, there is no confirmation that the call was received or that a pick-up has been scheduled. The Transit Manager informed the Grand Jury that retrieving the night-time phone messages was the first item of the work day. This is contradictory to the complaints of the passengers.

The Fairfield And Suisun Transit (FAST) passenger phone call logs include calls made in reference to FAST, Dial-a-Ride and Paratransit. The nine-month log had a total of 261 calls. Approximately 95% of the calls were complaints. The majority of complaints included:

- Driver/Staff attitude
- Bus did not appear as scheduled or at all
- Safety issues
- Scheduling/communications

These complaints are the same as the ones listed for action at the December 2008 Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs and were the main concerns of people in attendance at the PCC meeting on March 20, 2009. According to the Transit Program Manager/Analyst, these same issues are not being communicated among the various transit agencies.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1 – Notice of the Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs and the Paratransit Coordinating Council is not well advertised. Publicity is handled by the Solano Transportation Authority.

Recommendation 1 – Notice of upcoming meetings should be released by the Solano Transportation Authority to County newspapers allowing enough time for people wishing to attend to plan accordingly as required by the Brown Act. Additional notices should also be posted at public sites.

Finding 2 – Complaints heard at the Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs and the Paratransit Coordinating Council indicated a definite lack of effective telephone communications. Scheduling of rides is a difficult process and lack of follow-up leaves a level of uncertainty in the minds of the users. The close proximity of dispatchers to each other in the call center creates difficulties for callers due to background conversations.

Recommendation 2 – Managers/Supervisors of MV Transportation should enforce existing policy which requires that all calls are returned and rides confirmed. This should be PRIORITY ONE at the start of each business day and emphasis should be placed on returning calls. Background noise at the call center needs to be reduced.

Finding 3 – The Passenger Call Logs indicate that approximately 95% of calls are complaints. They are virtually the same as complaints lodged by users of the system on the Call Logs at the Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs and the Paratransit Coordinating Council meetings. It is apparent that the agencies are not making a joint effort to address these issues.

Recommendation 3 – Regular joint meetings of the Paratransit Coordinating Council, MV Transportation and the City of Fairfield Transit manager should resolve repetitive complaints brought forth by the riders.

Finding 4 – There are no First-Aid kits on the vehicles and CPR-certification is no longer required for drivers. This could lead to situations where riders who experience medical emergencies on transit vehicles may not receive timely care. Response time of Emergency Medical personnel varies.

Recommendation 4 – Whether or not these things are required by law, the presence of a First-Aid kit, which includes equipment for universal medical precautions and a CPR-certified driver, could improve the safety of the riders.

COMMENTS

Solano Paratransit Service runs Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. and Saturday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. While service is available on Saturday, it is limited to three buses. Additional Saturday service and limited Sunday service would benefit passengers and could possibly eliminate some of the Monday through Friday scheduling problems. Grants may be available to assist with revenue needed to increase service. In the absence of revenue from other sources, a reasonable fare increase could be implemented to offset the additional costs of operating more buses on Saturday and Sunday.

RESPONDING AND AFFECTED AGENCIES

Solano Transportation Authority
City of Fairfield - Transit Manager
Board of Solano County Public Hearing on Unmet Transit Needs
Paratransit Coordinating Council
MV Transportation, Inc.

COURTESY COPY

City of Fairfield City Manager
Solano County Board of Supervisors