



May 22, 2020

TO: Transportation, Energy, & Utilities Committee

FROM: Nicole Losch, Senior Planner, DPW
Chris Damiani, Transit Planner, Green Mountain Transit

RE: Green Mountain Transit updates: Zero-Fare Transit Evaluation and COVID-19

Introduction

In January 2020 City Council passed a Resolution requesting a study of fare-free transit and a report-back by Council's second meeting in May. Staff from the Department of Public Works, Clerk Treasurer, and Green Mountain Transit (GMT) met in February and developed an initial outline for this study. Since then, follow-up has been delayed while the COVID-19 pandemic shifted our work to address immediate public health and financial impacts that our agencies and community are facing. We remain committed to completing this study but request a 6-month time extension, presenting the report to City Council no later than its second meeting in November 2020.

Zero-Fare Operations & Impacts During COVID-19

GMT began zero-fare operations on March 17, 2020 in an effort to reduce the spread of COVID-19 between other passengers and transit operators. GMT continues to provide as much transit service as possible based on staffing levels, but some routes and some trips have been suspended. A hotline has been established to provide service updates to passengers without internet access. Passengers are encouraged to stay home if possible and allow essential travel for other essential workers and passengers who rely on transit as their only means of transportation. Passengers are asked to board and alight through the rear door, and, as of May 2, all passengers are required to wear a mask. To allow social distancing, GMT is limiting the number of people on board: 30' buses will allow 12 passengers, 35' buses will allow 14 passengers, 40' and 920 buses will allow 18 people, and Berlin cutaway buses will allow 4 people. Ridership has decreased approximately 75% as a result of the current pandemic.

GMT operations are heavily subsidized by Federal, State, and Local contributions, but fares do contribute approximately 20% of the cost to operate. The Federal government established the CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Emergency Security), a \$2 trillion relief package that gives transit agencies \$25 billion in

emergency relief. The Vermont Agency of Transportation received \$13 million of that contribution, of which GMT received \$7.6 million. GMT has applied CARES funding for personal protection equipment for employees, overtime and equipment to disinfect buses, and to cover a portion of the revenue lost by reduced fares. Ridership over the next 6 to 18 months is unpredictable and GMT is awaiting updates on local municipalities' ability to provide their annual contributions, which provides approximately 20% of the cost of operations. The GMT Board did approve reducing FY21 local assessments by 4%, and CARES funding will be used to backfill this revenue reduction and the additional lost fare revenue (predicted to be up \$1.9 million in FY21).