

Inclusive MOD in Flagstaff's "Forgotten Area"

By Grayson Lee

On the east side of Flagstaff, AZ, sandwiched between Interstate 40 and a stretch of railroad tracks, lies the Huntington and Industrial Corridor. Despite the area's industrial nature and low-density population, it is home to over 10 human and health services agencies, including the largest homeless shelter in Northern Arizona, behavioral and mental health services, a domestic violence shelter, a family food bank, a dialysis center, an alternative high school, and more. Huntington Drive and Industrial Drive cut through the corridor, which has few sidewalks and, until late 2021, had no public transit access.

Holly Creager is the Director of Programs at [Flagstaff Shelter Services](#), the congregate shelter in the corridor. According to Creager, the closest fixed-route bus stop is one to two miles from the shelter, a walk that is difficult and sometimes treacherous for her clients. "We have fires here in the summer. We have freezing temperatures and snow and impassable roads just as an everyday citizen here in Flagstaff. Add in any type of mobility need and it doesn't work," said Creager.



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[Mountain Line](#), the public transit agency running fixed-route buses and paratransit service throughout Flagstaff, decided to pursue a microtransit pilot project to address the critical need for transportation in this corridor. Estella Hollander, Mobility Planner at Mountain Line, applied for Transit Planning 4 All's [Inclusive Mobility on Demand \(MOD\) Grant](#), and received funding to inclusively plan and implement an innovative MOD project. [Transit Planning 4 All](#) (TP4A) funded pilot projects across the country to promote the practice of inclusive transit planning, which TP4A defines as "active and meaningful involvement of older adults and people with disabilities in transit planning and operations."

Mountain Line, officially known as NAIPTA, received a TP4A inclusive planning grant a few years previously, so the agency was familiar with the basics of inclusive planning. Additionally, Hollander currently leads the [Coordinated Mobility Council](#), a group of stakeholders that includes paratransit clients, non-profit organizations, members of the public, and more. The group discusses transportation challenges and solutions for older adults and people with disabilities, said Hollander. To begin the inclusive planning process for the microtransit project, Hollander first convened a steering committee, an essential aspect of all TP4A projects.

The Steering Committee

The Steering Committee for the project was made of up 14 members, with 50% being people with a disability and/or older adults. Hollander found Steering Committee participants through a variety of avenues. She sent letters to paratransit clients and reached out to service agencies within the corridor, like Flagstaff Shelter Services and the Hozhoni Foundation, which became key partners in the project. Mountain Line had a previous relationship with Flagstaff Shelter, providing free and discounted bus passes for the shelter's clients and donating two discontinued paratransit vans a few years ago.

Another Steering Committee member, Kevin Parkes, had been known to Mountain Line for a while, having served on the City of Flagstaff Transportation Commission for 6 years, the Transit Advisory Committee for Mountain Line, and other similar councils, as well as being an active paratransit rider. Hollander commended Parkes as the "champion" of the project, explaining that it's challenging to get people who have the time and interest to stay involved in a project for almost two years, but that Parkes took on leadership roles and helped look for other Steering Committee members.

Although Hollander found success through these approaches, it was difficult to gain participation from potential users of the service in the corridor. Because many of the potential clientele were transitory, such as people staying at the shelter, they were often hard to reach or gain input from, said David Wessel, Planning Manager for MetroPlan and a Steering Committee member. Due to these challenges, the project had to rely on agency representatives for participation in the Steering Committee,



rather than their clients. Hollander explained that they were only able to find one potential service client in the corridor to join the Steering Committee. Both Wessel and Russell Randall, another Steering Committee member, felt that despite these challenges, Hollander's persistence paid off. "I think Estella did a really good job ensuring representation of all the stakeholders involved. ... I think having a larger committee and having a lot of different groups represented is a challenge in itself. Making that happen is a challenge. But then also, a lot of different people have a lot of different views with regards to the needs of the people they represent," said Randall.

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The Steering Committee faced challenges not just in gaining members, but in defining their role on the project. "Honestly, it didn't feel like we were steering anything at first. We were voices for input, but steering – not so much. That got better as it went on," said Parkes. Wessel noted that the Steering Committee took some time to figure out what their role was, and that while some committee members were willing to jump in and make decisions, others were more hesitant. Several stakeholders commented that as time went on, their role became more defined and they were able to come together as a team and make decisions about important aspects of the project. Additionally, all the stakeholders interviewed praised Hollander's leadership and credit Hollander with helping to lead the team in finding their footing.

Planning Mountain Line GO!

Despite not being able to include many potential users on the Steering Committee, Hollander made sure to gain their input through pop-up outreach events. In the early stages, Holly Creager recalls Hollander setting up tabling events at the shelter to get feedback through surveys. Mountain Line gave out bus passes as an incentive to people willing to take the survey. They asked questions like, "Where are you trying to get to? What are some of your biggest transportation barriers? What times of day are you needing to travel?" Through this outreach, the team learned about the needs of the corridor. Then, they worked on details like times of service and the service area, which they relied on the Steering Committee to discuss.

Although the general service area for the project had been outlined in Mountain Line's grant application, the exact boundaries had not been delineated. Randall, who worked with students with disabilities at nearby Coconino High School for 40 years, fought to get the service area to include the school. "In that high school there are 250 high school students with [Individualized Education Programs]. That's a lot of

potential users of the service, and the area of service stopped short of being accessible to those high school kids. I would have liked to have seen that decision go a different way," said Randall. He went on, "I think there was a sense by a majority of the folks on the Steering Committee that perhaps the needs of other clients were greater, and that some other clients would be more likely to access and use the service, and that may have been true. I'm not sure." The agreed upon service area did not include Coconino High School, as it was too far away from the corridor.

Service Hours

Mountain Line GO! operates Monday – Friday from 7am – 6pm and weekends and Holidays from 8am – 5pm.

Service Area

Mountain Line will pick up and drop off riders anywhere within the designated service area, shown in yellow on the map. The service area is based on curb-to-curb coverage in the Huntington and Industrial corridor. Additional pick-up locations are defined as nearby bus stops, connecting you to Routes 2, 3, 7, and 66.

Another major decision that the Steering Committee discussed was fare structuring. After much discussion, the team eventually compromised on \$1 per ride. Randall explained that depending on the area within the corridor, some clients may not be able to afford the \$1 per ride, while others likely could have afforded more. However, Mountain Line still sought to provide access to the service for the former group. According to Creager, when the microtransit project began operations, Mountain Line gave out promo codes to people at the shelter which gave them free or discounted rides.

Innovative MOD: Commingling Microtransit and Paratransit

To make the project feasible and sustainable, the team decided to commingle paratransit and microtransit rides for the vehicles dedicated to the new service, meaning that the same vehicles would complete both paratransit and microtransit trips. Hollander explained that their paratransit trip costs were increasing, but their vans were sitting idle, sometimes for an hour or two at a time. "Without the commingling I don't know if we ever would have been able to start it, because to dedicate an extra one or two drivers would have been challenging," said Hollander,

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referencing how the driver shortage ended up delaying the project by a few months. Because the project was able to use paratransit vans for the microtransit service, Mountain Line did not need to procure new vehicles or find more drivers.

Mountain Line's microtransit and paratransit software provider, [Spare Labs reported that](#), "With the switch to commingling, Mountain Line significantly reduced vehicle idle times, and increased boardings per hour by 10%. Most microtransit trips took place during idle times for paratransit which resulted in higher vehicle productivity." To support the commingling of microtransit and paratransit, Mountain Line had to get both systems using the same software provider, which meant that they needed to switch the paratransit software to a new provider, [Spare Labs](#). Hollander described this switch as a large undertaking, but ultimately successful.

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The service, titled "Mountain Line GO!", launched in November of 2021. To advertise the new microtransit buses, Hollander continued outreach at organizations in the corridor. Flyers outlining the new transportation option were given to people entering Flagstaff Shelter, and Mountain Line staff trained people at the shelter in using the app or website. The team made sure to include several different options for booking a ride: phone, website, and an app.



In July of 2022, Mountain Line decided to pursue a partnership with Lyft to supplement the Mountain Line GO! program. Mountain Line had conducted an On Demand Feasibility Study in 2019, where they evaluated two options for on demand services: microtransit and partnerships with TNCs like Uber or Lyft. With the Lyft partnership, also conducted through Spare Labs, microtransit and paratransit customers could choose a Lyft vehicle instead of riding the Mountain Line GO! vans. However, the partnership came to an end in December. "Flagstaff is kind of a smaller city, and we ran into challenges where there weren't enough Lyft vehicles and there were a lot of cancellations. It just wasn't great customer service. And we had a lack of control," said Hollander.



Although the TP4A grant has now ended, Mountain Line decide to continue funding Mountain Line GO!, and the microtransit became a permanent service on July 1, 2022. Many of the stakeholders commented on the sustainability of the project as a measure of its success. "The fact that it moved from a pilot project to an implemented project is kind of the ultimate definition of success, and I'm really proud to be part of a community that can be that creative and that responsive," said Wessel.

In 2022, [Mountain Line GO! reported over 1,600 rides](#), and in the early stages of implementation, Mountain Line reported that 63% of riders were older adults and/or people with disabilities. Holly Creager explained that the service provides independence to her clients at Flagstaff Shelter, as well as access to vital services. The microtransit bus can take riders anywhere in the corridor with curb-to-curb service, but it also drops riders off at several fixed-route bus stops, where riders can get anywhere in Flagstaff served by the bus lines.

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Lessons Learned

When asked how they would improve the project, Steering Committee members expressed their hope that the microtransit service would grow throughout the city. "I would love to see the service grow throughout the city. ... I know that would be a very costly endeavor, but as someone who lives in the city, I would be very willing to help fund that endeavor," said Randall. Overall, stakeholders on the steering committee also felt positively about the inclusion process. "Actually having a face, even though they were mostly representatives of faces, was very meaningful. We get caught up in

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our processes sometimes and forget why we're doing it and for whom we're doing it," said Wessel.

In discussing lessons learned through the project, Hollander said that they learned three key things to keep in mind when doing inclusive planning: understand decision-making limitations, realize that inclusive planning takes time, and get community champions on your steering committee. "I think it's worth it because you get better outcomes and you get a better program that usable by the people that you want to serve," said Hollander.

Thanks to Holly Creager, Estella Hollander, Kevin Parkes, Russell Randall, and David Wessel.

Learn more about the project:

- [What is Mountain Line GO!?](#)
- [Flagstaff- Lessons Learned from the MountainLineGo MicroTransit Project](#)
- [Mountain Line GO! Flexes idle paratransit vehicles into microtransit solutions for the underserved](#)
- [Optimizing Your Paratransit Service with Modern Technology Solutions – Webinar Takeaways](#)

Transit Planning 4 All is a transportation planning project focused on promoting inclusive planning. TP4A is a partnership between the Administration for Community Living, the Community Transportation Association of America, USAgging, the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston, and DJB Evaluation Consulting.

