PARATRANSIT OPERATORS
CITE EVER-HIGHER DEMAND

What's new? Not much. Ridership is still high, and funding is still vanishing. Many providers are still looking to technology to cope and some are including new types of vehicles in their fleets. Travel training, which appears to be growing in popularity, may be a partial solution.

>By NICOLE SCHLOSSER, Senior Editor

FOR ITS EIGHTH ANNUAL PARATRANSIT survey, meant to serve as a snapshot of the industry, *METRO Magazine* received responses from 109 paratransit providers from 37 states across the U.S. We changed our online survey slightly this year, clarifying some questions and adding others to address travel training and no-show policies. Respondents answered 22 questions about these issues in addition to ridership, concerns and innovations.

FLEET FACTS

There are a total of 11,176 vehicles represented in this year's survey results, with the smallest fleet coming in at two vehicles and the largest comprised of 1,620 vehicles. The average fleet size is 102 vehicles, down only slightly from last year, and the median is 44.

Thirty percent of respondents report-ed having mid- to full-sized vehicles (more than 25 feet in length) in their fleets. Small vehicles made up 69 percent of fleets, a significant increase from the 23 percent reported in last year's survey. A breakdown of bus sizes for all fleets can be found in Figure 1 (see page 18). Vans accounted for 18 percent of all fleets, which is almost exactly the same as the total reported in our 2010 survey, while taxis comprised 7 percent (down by only 2 percent from last year's data).

2012 PURCHASES

Forty-eight percent of carriers surveyed plan to buy new vehicles next year, down only a bit from last year's 56 percent. The total amount of vehicles on order is 1,173. Three providers plan to procure more than 100 vehicles in the upcoming fiscal year. Forty-four percent do not plan to buy vehicles in 2012

(Figure 2). This number is a significant increase from last year's 39 percent without vehicle purchasing plans.

RIDERSHIP REMAINS HIGH

Sixty-six percent of operators cited an increase in their 2010 ridership numbers, averaging 9 percent, while 34 percent responded with decreases, which averaged 6 percent (Figure 9.) While the increase is not as high as last year's 70 percent, the trend of increasing demand continues. Only one respondent reported neither an increase nor a decrease in ridership from 2009 to 2010. The largest ridership increase reported was 50 percent.

TECH EASES DEMAND

While the majority of carriers claimed they did not utilize any new technology in 2010, many carriers are still seeing substantial results from inte-

Paratransit Survey

FIGURE 1: FLEET NUMBERS-PARATRANSIT VEHICLE TYPES

75% BUS **7% TAXI** **18% VAN**

grating technological tools into their practices. Overwhelmingly, operators chose automatic vehicle location, with scheduling and dispatch software being the most often cited, at 25 percent, to adjust resources to demand, increase on-time performance and productivity, reduce communication errors and keep trip costs down. Of all operators surveyed, 43 percent implemented some form of technology to help accommodate additional demand.

Utah Transit Authority (UTA) reported implementing a computerized electronic manifest system that is supported by GPS technology and a cellular link to radio control.
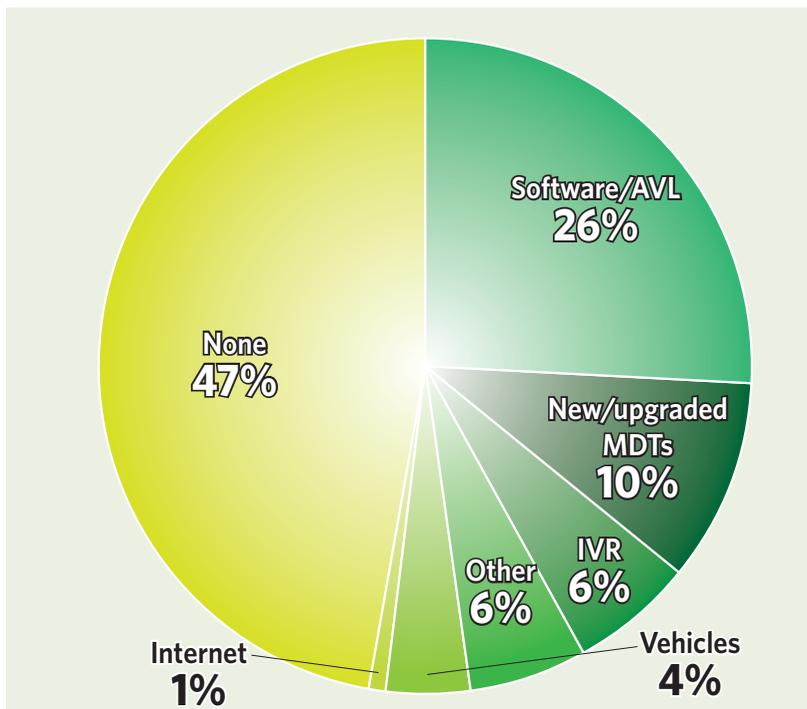
"This has improved reliability with

arrival and departure time tracking, assisted with transfers to fixed-route, enabled us to validate no-shows, and provided historical data for investigative purposes," **Gerry Carpenter**, senior media relations specialist, UTA, says.

Additionally, a few respondents cited adding or replacing vehicles, including taxis, low-floor buses and larger vans as a way to cope with an uptick in demand.
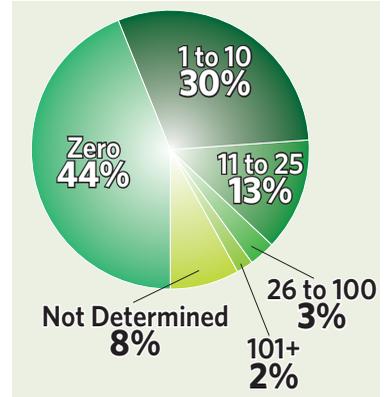
"We replaced approximately 70 percent of our fleet with vehicles with increased capacities," **April Warnock**, paratransit superintendent, **Santa Cruz Metropolitan District** wrote. "The new vans have the ability to carry a wheelchair and a scooter at the same time, an improvement over the mini-vans we had before."

FIGURE 2: 2012 PURCHASES

1 to 10 — 30%
Zero 44%
11 to 25 — 13%
26 to 100 — 3%
101+ — 2%
Not Determined 8%

The majority of carriers surveyed plan to buy vehicles next year.

PRODUCTIVITY AND BILLING

The most common response, at 69 percent, for calculating productivity, among both those operators using contractors and those that don't, was the use of a passengers-per-revenue-hour formula. Operators that bill per hour average 2.12 passengers. Three respondents commented that productivity is tracked by vehicle hours, and one carrier claimed to not track productivity.

Regarding billing, 45 percent of respondents reported using contractors, with two-thirds billing per hour and one-third billing per trip.

DENIALS AND REPORTING

In response to the question, "Do you require in-person interviews in order to become certified?" 60 percent do not require in-person interviews. The rate of denial decisions averaged at approximately 6 percent. Fifty-seven percent of carriers report trip denials, and only 1 percent do not have a denial policy.
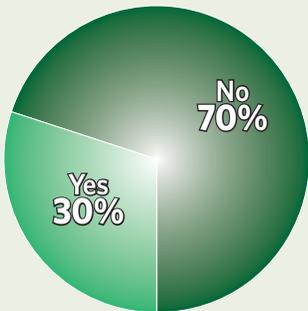
NO-SHOWS

This year for the first time, *METRO*

FIGURE 3: TECHNOLOGY UPGRADES

Software/AVL 26%
None 47%
New/upgraded MDTs 10%
Other 6%
IVR 6%
Internet 1%
Vehicles 4%

While most operators claimed they did not utilize any new technology in 2010, many carriers are still seeing substantial results from integrating technological tools into their practices. Overwhelmingly, carriers chose automatic vehicle location.

Paratransit Survey

FIGURE 4: LIFT USE

22% The mean percentage of ridership that uses wheelchair lifts.

FIGURE 6: INTEGRATION

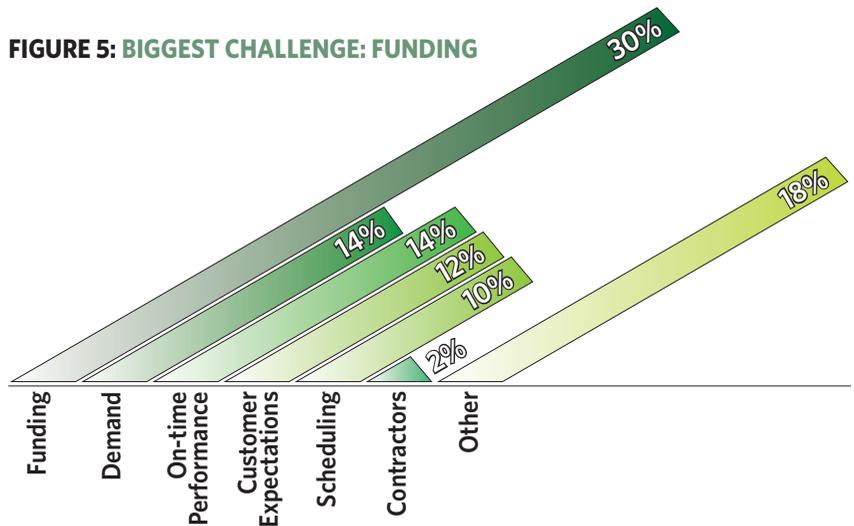"Do you integrate paratransit with fixed-route service?"

No
70%

Yes
30%

FIGURE 5: BIGGEST CHALLENGE: FUNDING

30%

18%

14% 14%

12%

10%

2%

Funding | Demand | On-time Performance | Customer Expectations | Scheduling | Contractors | Other

asked providers whether they have or are considering a "No-Show" policy. Eighty-seven percent responded that they have a "No-Show" policy, 3 percent do not have a policy on no-shows but are considering one, and 1 percent do not have a "No-Show" policy and are not considering implementing one. Operators that either have the policy in place or are looking into it commented that such a policy is helpful with cutting down on suspensions, keeping the no-show rate low, and increasing productivity and ef-

ficiency. One operator also notes that, "Too many no shows…requires [other] customers to ride out of their way."

TRAVEL TRAINING

Operators also were asked this time around whether they have or are looking into a travel training program. Slightly more than half of respondents reported having a travel training program in place, while about 12 percent are planning to create one.

Reasons for having the program included, "To help drivers and passengers understand their obligations," and showing increasing numbers of ADA customers that they can use the fixed-route system. Providers that are looking to implement one cited cutting costs, helping passengers "develop the skills and knowledge to safely ride fixed line service," "giving our riders more choices

in how to meet their transportation needs" and "getting more passengers that are able to ride fixed route on the buses to reduce demand." Two operators reported that their travel training programs were suspended or cut altogether due to shrinking budgets.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

As usual, the top challenge experienced by operators is funding. Nearly one-third cited this as their primary obstacle to providing service, and nearly every respondent who listed money as a hurdle linked it with demand, which was the second-highest ranked challenge at 14 percent.

"Containing costs as demand continues to increase is a challenge. Balancing the need to reduce costs while maintaining tight controls and service quality has become increasingly difficult," **Dana Wiemiller**, manager,

FIGURE 7: WHAT IS YOUR TOP CONCERN?

37%

17% 17%

15%

14%

Customer Service | Training | Recruiting/ Retention | Injury | Other
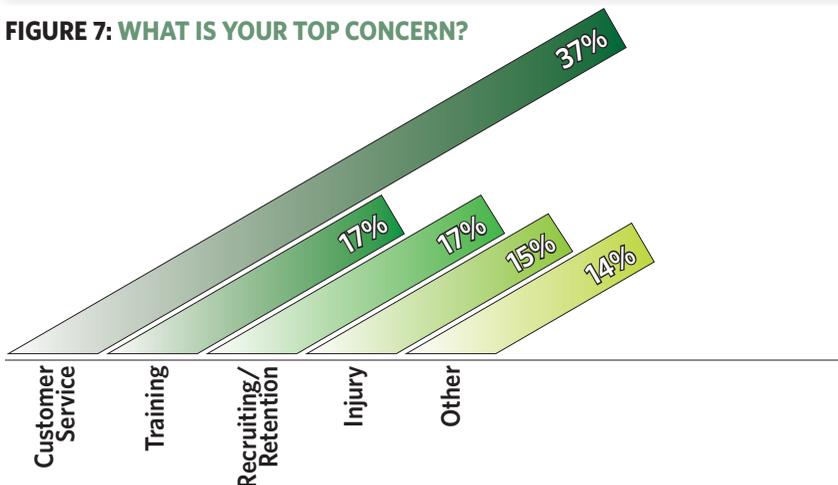
FIGURE 8:
WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY

57% Number of all paratransit vehicles that are wheelchair accessible.

Operator chooses low-floor buses to enhance productivity

Bellingham, Wash.-based **Whatcom Transportation Authority**'s paratransit system has noticed measurable benefits during its recent low-floor bus rollout. The buses went into service in early April.

The vehicles, manufactured by **Arboc Mobility**, are the program's first to be equipped with ramps instead of lifts.

Before purchasing the vehicles, the operator conducted several site visits last year across the U.S., focusing primarily on transit agencies in the state of Washington that use low-floor buses.

The carrier's main concern, when considering the buses, was dwell time at pickup and drop locations. "We made some back-of-the-envelope projections of what it might mean if we had a fleet of fully equipped low-floor buses, and how much time that might save us," **Cris Colburn**, manager of specialized transportation, says. "Now that we have them, we're seeing a difference in dwell times between the rest of our buses and the low-floor buses, something like a minute of dwell time whether the rider is a wheelchair user or a walking rider."

One minute of dwell time on either end of a ride means roughly two minutes per ride, Colburn points out. "Our productivity for paratransit is somewhere on the high side, at three trips an hour, so we're thinking we might see somewhere between 45 and 60 minutes of time savings." For Whatcom, that would translate into approximately two or three more rides per eight-hour shift.

Another benefit the operator anticipated in acquiring the low-floor buses was removing the obstacle of steps for riders. "We believe that the elimination of the stairwell...represents a safety improvement," Colburn says.

In addition, since the new low-floor vehicles have been in service, Whatcom has seen fuel savings of about one mile per gal-

Whatcom Transportation Authority is saving one minute of dwell time on each end of the trips it delivers with its two new Arboc Mobility low-floor buses.

lon better fuel economy. "Especially in these times, a few hundred bucks a vehicle a year [helps]," Colburn says.

Whatcom is still monitoring locations with steeper grades that may be difficult to serve with a ramp, how the boarding works inside the bus and securement. "We're seeing how they work as far as access in different locations," Colburn explains. "You never know what combination of wheelchairs might be assigned to a given driver. You have to think, 'Will these three people who use wheelchairs be able to fit on this run?'"

The operator's board of directors has approved the purchase of two more vehicles, which are expected to arrive in the fourth quarter.

FAST FACTS
Agency: Whatcom Transportation Authority
Location: Bellingham, Wash.
ADA riders transported in 2010: 174,616
Total vehicles: 40

Burlington, Wash.'s Skagit Transit is one of the many agencies that reported that increasing demand is placing more responsibility on its drivers. Robert Gummere, operations supervisor, says that in cases of steep, graveled or uneven pathways, assisting clients to and from their door may risk injury to the driver and cause them to lose sight of the coach, with other passengers on board.

FIGURE 9: RIDERSHIP

The trend of increasing demand continues.

Down 33%
Up 66%
No Change 1%

community transportation, **Orange County** (Calif.) **Transportation Authority**, says.

As demand rises, drivers are expected to provide more customer assistance. More than one-tenth of carriers cited stretching resources and placing more responsibility on drivers.
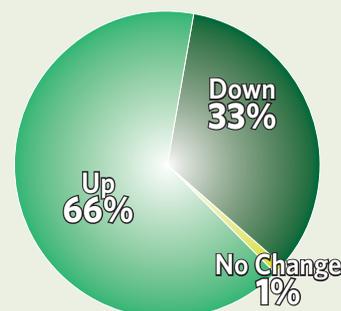
"Customers need more assistance getting to/from vans than drivers can safely provide, e.g. getting wheelchairs

down stairs with no ramp, assisting customers in snowy, icy conditions," **Mary Gaston**, assistant GM, **Muncie Indiana Transit System** says.

Almost one-fifth of respondents mentioned other challenges that didn't fit neatly into any common category. These ranged from "working with the senior population that have mental issues" to "politically vocal populace in a diverse terrain."

Thirty-seven percent of operators are mainly concerned with providing good customer service. The number of providers with this concern increased considerably from last year's 24 percent. Tying at second place were training and recruitment and retention (Figure 8). [m]