



Town of University Park, Maryland
Final Transit Task Force Report

3/23/21

Executive Summary

The Transit Task Force was established in July 2020 to assess current operations and make recommendations for the future of transit in University Park. Pre-pandemic, the Town used its two buses to operate (1) a weekday transit program to and from the Prince George's Plaza metro stop with morning and evening scheduled stops throughout town, and (2) a paratransit program that provided free transportation to seniors and individuals with disabilities for certain scheduled appointments and shopping.

This report lays out the strengths and limitations of different options for the future of transit and paratransit in University Park and does not advocate for any particular outcome—with two exceptions. First, the Transit Task Force found that providing paratransit service is a core value of the town and recommends that the town continue to provide paratransit services in some form. Second, the Transit Task Force also recommends that the Helping Hands University Park (HHUP) Committee manage — with financial and administrative support from the Town — any future paratransit services given its close connection to the served community.

The decision about the future of University Park's transit and paratransit programs lies with the Mayor and Town Council and should be considered in full context. When discussing the future of these programs, we hope that the Mayor and Town Council will pause to remember that it is harder to calculate the very real qualitative benefits than the quantitative costs. Further, these benefits and costs — presented as strengths and limitations throughout this report to better reflect qualitative considerations — should be considered in the context of larger budget tradeoffs. The “transit” line item is the single largest in the budget other than personnel related expenses for public works and police and public safety.

Please also note that Appendix A at the end of this report presents the strengths and limitations of the transit and paratransit options available to University Park in a 1-page matrix with quantitative and qualitative information presented together. Please contact the Transit Task Force if we can be of service moving forward.

Best regards,

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Establishment and Activities of the Transit Task Force

A June 30, 2020 memo from Town Administrator Deutsch to Mayor Carey recommended establishment of a Transit System Task Force to assess the current bus operation and make recommendations for the future of transit in University Park. Specifically, this memo recommended the Task Force (1) conduct a cost/benefit analysis of the program, (2) analyze the carbon footprint benefit of transit, and related environmental issues, (3) determine program changes that may be necessary when the Purple Line is in service, (4) assess the dual focus of the service and whether there is a better option for paratransit, and (5) review the financial implications of any suggested changes.

Subsequently, at its July 6, 2020 meeting, the University Park Town Council created a Transit Task Force to assess the operation of the Town bus and make recommendations for the future of transit in University Park. Then, at its July 20 meeting, the Council appointed Joe Thompson as Chair and Kelly Hilovsky, Emily Ryan, David Tully, Carol Weese and Emily Alvarez as members of the Transit Task Force. Town Clerk Andrea Marcavitch, who, among her many duties, directs the bus system and supervises the drivers, served as staff liaison. Mayor Carey was also recognized as a Task Force member, *ex officio*. The Town Council voted unanimously to establish and make appointments to the Transit Task Force.

In addition to the five tasks listed in Town Administrator Deutsch's memo, the Transit Task Force was to:

- comply with Maryland Open Meetings and Public Information requirements,
- hold at least one public forum where the perspectives of Town residents may be heard,
- conclude its work by April 2021, and
- prepare a report on its findings and recommendations and present it publicly at a Town Council Meeting.

After its formation, the Transit Task Force met monthly since August to examine the options for the bus services. For more information on the Transit Task Force's activities, see the agendas and notes posted on the Town of University Park agenda center: www.upmd.org/agendacenter. On February 9, 2021, the Transit Task Force held a public forum to discuss the draft options and strengths and limitations. A recording of the Transit Task Force public forum is available at www.upmd.org/publicforums.

Background on University Park Transit and Paratransit Operations

The Town bus service began in 2002 through a federally funded Prince George's County grant program that enabled the purchase of a small bus equipped with a wheel-chair lift to provide paratransit services to seniors and individuals with disabilities who required transportation assistance. This service was also known in the County as the "Call-A-Bus" program. The Town Council envisioned broader possibilities, and the Town experimented with adding morning and afternoon shuttle service for residents commuting via the Prince George's Plaza Metro. Residents advocated for this service to continue and the shuttle to Metro became an established service of the Town in 2003. Both commuter and paratransit services grew in use.

In 2015, the Town was forced to withdraw from the County "Call-A-Bus" system and began operating on its own with two larger 20-passenger buses equipped with wheel-chair lifts. The larger-capacity bus necessitated that the operators have commercial drivers licenses (CDL) with a passenger endorsement. In mid-March 2020, Mayor Carey suspended the bus service for the safety of drivers and passengers through the COVID-19 pandemic. A date for resuming the service has not yet been determined.

The program, when operating, serves two distinct groups of University Park residents, including Metro commuters, and seniors and disabled persons needing transportation to doctors' offices and other appointments, as well as a weekly trip to the Giant in Hyattsville. The Town offers free bus service for residents from various signed bus stops around Town to the Prince George's Plaza Metro stop in the morning and the reverse route in the evening. The bus runs Monday through Friday with pickups every half hour between 6:00 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. to the Metro stop and from 4:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. from the Metro stop. The Town also provides free lift-equipped, door-to-door, transportation to seniors, individuals with disabilities, and veterans for medical appointments, shopping, employment, education and social activities within a five-mile radius. Appointments are required and are scheduled by the Town Clerk's office Tuesday through Thursday between 10 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. The Town Clerk manages the transit and paratransit programs, with assistance from an Administrative Assistant on record keeping and scheduling the bus and from the Public Works director and staff on operations and maintenance of the buses. There are two part-time bus drivers, one who works mornings and one who works evenings.

To provide some context, a survey by the Maryland Municipal League in 2018 found that fewer than 10% of municipalities have a municipal bus system.¹ Follow up research found that the municipalities that operate a bus system are either much larger than University Park (e.g., Annapolis and Bowie) or operate some version of the County Call-A-Bus program primarily for limited paratransit services. University Park's transit program appears to be unique in Maryland for a municipality of its size.

¹<https://www.mdmunicipal.org/684/Municipal-Services-Survey>.

Option A: Status Quo and Possible Modifications

Maintaining the status quo is the first option available to University Park. This entails keeping both the transit and paratransit programs in their pre-pandemic form. In 2019, which was the last full year before the service was suspended during the pandemic, the weekday shuttle to and from Metro transported residents on an average of 87 riders daily, 58 riders in the morning commute and 29 in the afternoon. The paratransit service averaged 19 riders monthly, much of them by a core group of 4 to 5 senior residents who use the service weekly to go grocery shopping. Maintaining the status quo has distinct strengths and limitations, briefly described below and presented in matrix form in Appendix A. Also included in this section is a list of possible modifications to the status quo that would either improve service or lower cost.

Strengths

The four main strengths of the status quo are (1) environmental benefits, (2) amenity value, (3) option value, and (4) social value. First, the transit program generates estimated environmental benefits of \$950 per year versus a similar number of car trips to the Prince George's Plaza Metro station.² Second, the bus provides an amenity value to all the residents of University Park. Specifically, the transit program makes University Park more attractive to home buyers because of potential individual cost savings getting to the Metro and because it enables one- and zero-car families direct access to public transportation. Local realtors described the shuttle as a huge selling point and, for some, a deciding factor of whether they buy a house in University Park or live elsewhere. Third, the town buses provide an option value in the sense that the Town can use them for other purposes. For example, the Town could drive residents to Upper Marlboro to testify before the County Council on contentious issues. Fourth, residents derive a social value from interacting with their neighbors on the bus.

Limitations

At an audited cost of \$85,658 in 2019, the transit service is the largest non-personnel line item in the town budget. Additional costs for hours spent by the Town Clerk's Office and Mechanic raise the overall cost to \$96,721 for 2019, or a per household cost of about \$105 per year. At 87 rides per day, each trip (one way) costs approximately \$4.44

²The Task Force used a series of conservative estimates to calculate the environmental benefits from greenhouse gas emissions reductions attributable to the transit program. By conservative, we mean estimates likely to overstate greenhouse gas emissions reduction benefits to account for other environmental benefits that cannot easily be quantified. Specifically, the Task Force used an average passenger vehicle miles per gallon value of 15 and bus miles per gallon of 10. In 2019, University Park buses traveled 19,484 miles. Assuming this mileage displaces 87 passenger vehicle trips per day of 2 miles to and from the Metro for the 261 operating days of the Town bus would result in savings of 1079 gallons of gas annually. The Environmental Protection Agency emissions factor for gasoline is 8.8kg CO₂/gallon, resulting in emissions reductions of 9,497 Kg CO₂ (or 9.47 metric tons of CO₂). We used a social cost of carbon of \$100 / metric ton of CO₂. Higher than the current interim value in the U.S. and roughly equivalent to values used in the European Union. This results in environmental benefits of \$950.

per person.³ 2019 ridership numbers showed that, on average, 3.3% of the population used the bus services on any given day.⁴ See Table 1 for additional details.

Budgeted amount	85,658
Mechanic cost ⁵	4,813
Administrative cost ⁶	6,250
Total Cost	96,721
# of homes	923
Population	2651
2019 total rides	21761
Average 2019 rides/day	87
Cost per household per year	105
Cost per ride	4.44
% population ride each day	3.3%

An additional limitation is the high likelihood that the pandemic will decrease ridership. While the extent of this change is unclear, it is reasonable to assume that more people will be working from home in the future. This would, among other things, reduce environmental benefits and increase the average cost per ride. Further, a key administrative limitation is the need to hire drivers with a commercial driver's license (CDL) to drive the town's buses. The town bus driver position has irregular hours and it is difficult to secure in-demand CDL drivers and backup drivers as needed. And the cost of employing drivers goes up every year given pay schedules.

³The average cost per ride of \$4.44 is likely an overestimate as it includes a total of 225 paratransit riders in 2019. The cost per ride for the paratransit system as operated in 2019 is higher than \$4.44, as some of these rides were for single riders. The bulk of paratransit trips in 2019 (194 riders) were to the grocery store with multiple riders. The rest were for medical and other appointments. It is not possible to separate out these paratransit costs or isolate a cost per ride from only the transit portion of the status quo as operations and maintenance costs are intermingled.

⁴For some additional context on ridership, see survey results from the April 2019 Operations and Management Study here: <https://www.upmd.org/documentcenter/view/1322>. Page 33 notes that half of the over 150 respondents surveyed for this report used the Town bus and over 60 percent were very satisfied or satisfied with the service. Further, a spring 2019 analysis of the Town's transit system by University of Maryland students found slightly different results. Of the 158 respondents in the survey for this report, the largest percentage (31.6%) of residents stated that they use the Town bus occasionally for their work commute, and the next largest percentage (31%) answered that they never use the Town Bus for their work commute. For more information, see <https://www.upmd.org/DocumentCenter/View/1772>.

⁵Mechanic costs are in addition to the spending figures in the transit line item under General Government line G25 in the adopted 2021 budget. See <https://www.upmd.org/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/240>. These costs were estimated by multiplying the time spent by the Town Mechanic (275 hours in 2018 and 2019 / 2 to get 2019 estimate) by the \$35 hourly rate for the Mechanic.

⁶Administrative costs are in addition the spending figures in the Town budget line item for transit under General Government line G25 in the adopted 2021 budget. These costs were estimated by multiplying the time spent by the Town Clerk and an Administrative Assistant on the transit and paratransit program (250 hours in 2019) by the average of the Clerk and Administrative Assistant's hourly wage (about \$25/hr.).

Possible modifications to Status Quo

The Task Force developed a list of possible modifications to the status quo which are listed below with a quick look at their impact on quality of service, cost, and administrative burden.

Modification	Quality of Service	Cost	Admin. burden	notes
User fee	—	↓	↑	Likely not possible to charge high enough user fee to fully offset program. Residents may feel that the higher taxes in UP is their “user fee.” According to the Town Attorney, charging a user fee for transit may subject the Town to Federal transit regulations.
Fewer stops	—	↓	—	Fewer stops could make commutes shorter and more predictable, but some may have to walk further.
No evening service	↓	↓	—	Ridership drops substantially in the evenings. However this could leave morning riders without a way home.
Extra Bus in evening transit rotation	↑	↑	—	Pickup at Metro would be every 15 minutes rather than 30 minutes which could increase ridership in the evening.
Alternating between PG Plaza and College Park metro and adding UMD stop.	↑ / —	↑	—	Would likely need to streamline route or utilize second shuttle. Could increase ridership.
Switch to College Park metro – Purple Line	↑ / —	—	—	Commute may be slightly longer but would be more attractive to those commuting to Montgomery County or New Carrollton using the Purple Line. This may increase ridership.
Add transit GPS tracking	↑	↑	↑	Would provide (especially evening) transit users with a more predictable commute but there would be a cost for equipment and maintenance.
Identification check	—	—	↑	This would eliminate any “free riders” but it doesn’t reflect the values of the Town and it’s unclear if there would be any cost savings.
Transit reservation system	↓	—	↑	Residents would have to “reserve” a spot on the shuttle each day. This would be challenging for those without set schedules. The administrative burden for this option would be high.
Electric Non-CDL buses	—	↑	—	Startup costs would be high, considering need to purchase buses. Operations costs should be lower.
Allow non-residents (CHE, CP, RP) to pay a yearly fee to use shuttle.	—	↓	↑	Would need to determine cost of user fee. This option would not add additional stops. For example, RP Station residents would likely use the Town Hall stop. May subject the Town to additional regulation.

Option B: Bus Transit, HHUP Managed Contract Rideshare Paratransit

This option would preserve the status quo for the transit program but transfer day-to-day management of paratransit activities to the Helping Hands University Park (HHUP) Committee with certain administrative assistance provided by the Town. It is worth emphasizing that HHUP is a Committee of the Town of University Park. As such, HHUP has the financial, administrative, and legal support of the Town. The Task Force envisions provision of paratransit operations in this option by a specialized rideshare service. HHUP would manage the service contract and help members access rides. Town Hall staff, largely the Town Clerk and Town Administrator would provide administrative assistance. The Town Attorney would guide contractual and legal work.

Strengths

The primary strength of Option B is the lower administrative burden on the Town and potential budget savings from more efficient administration of paratransit services. Paratransit ridership may increase due to the connection of HHUP to the served community. The principle is that services are best operated closest to the customers. This option maintains the amenity, option, and social values provided by the Town buses and transit program.

Limitations

The overall costs of Option B are likely to be similar to the status quo, with future diminished ridership due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There would continue to be a limited available workforce for transit operations due to the irregular hours and CDL requirement.

Option C: Contractor Managed Transit and Paratransit

In this option, University Park would hire a contractor to provide transit and paratransit services. University Park would no longer own buses or directly manage these services.

Strengths

A contractor managed bus and paratransit transit program could help the Town in achieving some cost savings, while maintaining a level of service and benefits similar to the current program. The total costs savings would depend on the structure of a contractor managed program. For example, if the contractor provided the vehicles and bus maintenance, the Town could sell one or both of the buses and reduce or eliminate \$4,813 in costs for using the town Mechanic to service the buses.⁷ A contractor managed program would likely result in a lower day-to-day administrative burden on the Town, resulting in a maximum savings of \$6,250 of administrative time. However, town staff would likely continue to spend some administrative time overseeing the contractor. This option would also maintain the social and amenity values of the existing transit and paratransit program.

Limitations

A contractor managed program could come at increased cost to the Town. The Town received an estimate in early 2020 for a contractor managed transit program--with the Town continuing to provide and maintain the bus fleet – for approximately \$89,726 per year. This estimate did not include a cost for a contractor managed paratransit program. Under a contractor managed program, the Town would face uncertainty about the cost of the program due to annual contract cost increases and would have less control over day-to-day operations, such as staffing and communications. It would also be more challenging for the Town to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on commuting patterns or paratransit ridership as needed. There could also be decreased environmental benefits if the contractor provides a bus fleet that is housed and maintained outside of University Park.⁸

⁷Research by the Town Clerk estimated the value of one bus at approximately \$22,000 and the other at about \$10,000. Auction fees were 2.5% of sale price based on the last auction sale of a Town vehicle.

⁸Note that the \$89,726 quote for contractor provided transit included parking the contractor-owned buses at Town Hall. The cost of the contractor services would increase if the bus was parked at their facilities due to increased gas use and driver time.

Option D: No Transit, HHUP Managed Contract Rideshare Paratransit

Option D would eliminate the transit program and transfer day-to-day management of paratransit activities to the HHUP Committee with certain administrative assistance provided by the Town. The Task Force envisions provision of paratransit operations in this option by a specialized rideshare service. HHUP would manage the service contract and help members access rides.

Strengths

Option D would likely result in budget savings of \$85,000 per year, assuming about \$10,000 per year was reserved for paratransit services managed by HHUP.⁹ This option would also reduce the administrative burden on the Town and may increase paratransit ridership in comparison to the status quo because of the connections HHUP maintains with the served community.

Limitations

Option D would eliminate the environmental, amenity, option, and social benefits provided by the status quo because the Town would no longer own buses or provide transit services.

⁹Paratransit service averaged 19 riders monthly, much of them by a core group of 4 to 5 senior residents who use the service weekly to go grocery shopping. Preliminary investigation of paratransit rideshare programs in neighboring communities suggests that \$10,000 is a reasonable starting point that is likely an overestimate, but pursuing a new option presents unknowns.

Option E: Smaller Bus Transit (No CDL), HHUP Managed Contract Rideshare Paratransit

In this option, the Town would sell its two large buses and purchase two smaller buses that do not require a CDL driver. Paratransit activities would be transferred to the HHUP Committee with certain administrative assistance provided by the town. The Task Force envisions provision of paratransit operations in this option by a specialized rideshare service. HHUP would manage the service contract and help members access rides with administrative support from Town Hall.

Strengths

Option E would provide modest budget savings due to decreased personnel costs because a commercial driver's license (CDL) would not be required (typical hourly range of \$12-\$17/hr. for non-CDL and \$18-\$23/hr. for CDL drivers). Hiring personnel would be easier because the pool of drivers without CDL's is larger, providing an additional benefit by making it easier to obtain backup drivers when needed. The Town could sell its current buses to offset part of the purchase price of new vehicles. This option also maintains the amenity, option, and social values provided by the status quo. It also potentially increases environmental benefits due to the smaller buses and may increase paratransit ridership because of the connections HHUP maintains with the served community.

Limitations

Option E would cost modestly less than status quo, which would still be a large budget item. The Town would need to purchase smaller buses and then operate and maintain the buses, maintaining a relatively high administrative burden on the Town. Even considering the potential effects of the pandemic, the smaller buses may not accommodate transit ridership at certain times.

Option F: Smaller Bus Transit (no CDL) and Paratransit

In this option, the Town would sell its two large buses and purchase two smaller buses that do not require a CDL driver. Otherwise, the Town's activities would look much like the status quo in Option F, including direct Town provision of paratransit services.

Strengths

Smaller buses would provide advantages resulting in some cost savings to the budget, most significantly in decreased personnel costs because a commercial driver's license (CDL) would not be required (typical hourly range of \$12-\$17/hr. for non-CDL and \$18-\$23/hr. for CDL drivers). Hiring personnel would be easier because the pool of drivers without CDL's is larger, providing an additional benefit by making it easier to obtain backup drivers when needed. Operational costs and environmental impacts would be decreased by lowered fuel consumption and emissions, although these are hard to estimate without more specifics about the vehicles replacing the Town's current buses, which could be sold to offset part of the purchase price of new vehicles. This option would also preserve the amenity, option, and social values provided by town ownership of transit and paratransit vehicles.

Limitations

Option F would likely cost modestly less than the status quo on an annual basis but would require the Town to purchase new, smaller buses that did not require a CDL and could still be used for paratransit services. Smaller buses maintain the large administrative burden, specifically for the Town Clerk's Office (approximately \$6,250 in administrative costs annually). Ridership, especially to/from Metro post pandemic is unknown, the potential exists that smaller buses may not accommodate ridership, especially during morning Metro transits. Other limitations are similar to the status quo.

Appendix A: Strengths and Limitations of University Park Transit and Paratransit Options

Option		Strengths	Limitations
A	Status Quo (Bus Transit and Paratransit)	Environmental benefits (\$950/yr.), amenity value, option value, social value	Expensive (\$96,720/yr.), benefits go to limited populations, large administrative burden, pandemic likely to reduce ridership, limited available workforce (CDL, irregular hours)
A1	User fee	Budget revenue	High user fee to fully offset program (4.44 per ride one way; 8.88 round trip), additional administrative burden.
A2	Fewer stops	Modest cost reduction	Inconvenience to transit users
A3	No evening service	Cost reduction	Inconvenience to transit users
A4	Extra bus in evening transit rotation	Convenience for transit users	Increased mileage and cost, availability of drivers
A5	Alternating between PG Plaza and College Park metro and adding UMD stop	Convenience for transit users	Increased town administrative burden, increased mileage and cost
A6	Switch to College Park metro - purple line	Connection with Purple Line	Increased mileage and cost.
A7	Add transit GPS tracking	Convenience for transit users	Cost for GPS hardware and maintenance (\$2,250 in yr. 1, followed by \$1,600/yr.), increased administrative burden
A8	Identification check	Eliminates free riders	Increased administrative burden
A9	Transit reservation system	Certainty about transit users and schedule	Increased administrative burden
A10	Electric Non-CDL buses	Environmental benefits, revenue from selling old buses	Need to purchase electric buses, unknown maintenance costs
A11	Allow non-residents (CHE, CP, RP) to pay a yearly fee to use shuttle.	Increased revenue	Increased administrative burden
B	Bus Transit, HHUP Managed Contract Rideshare Paratransit	Lower town administrative burden; potential budget savings; maintains amenity, option, and social values; potential increased paratransit ridership	Similar cost to status quo, pandemic effect, limited available workforce (CDL, irregular hours)
C	Contractor Managed Transit and Paratransit	Lower day to day administrative burden on town, can sell buses, maintains social and amenity values, potential budget savings	Likely more expensive in the long term, Loss of option value, Less control over day to day operations, Potential decreased environmental benefits, Lost social value, pandemic effect
D	No Transit, HHUP Managed Contract Rideshare Paratransit	Budget savings (potential savings of \$85,000/yr.), lower administrative burden on town, may increase paratransit ridership	lose environmental benefits (lost benefits of \$950/yr.) and amenity and option and social values
E	Smaller Bus (No CDL) Transit, HHUP Managed Contract Rideshare Paratransit	Modest budget savings (no CDL); sell current buses; maintains amenity, option, and social values; potentially increases enviro benefits; may increase paratransit ridership	Cost modestly less than status quo. Need to purchase smaller buses, operations and maintenance would remain expensive, high admin burden on town, pandemic effect.
F	Smaller Bus (No CDL) Transit and Paratransit	Modest budget savings (no CDL); potentially increases environmental benefits; maintains amenity value, option value, and social value; can sell buses	Cost modestly less than status quo, limits other budget priorities, benefits go to limited populations, large administrative burden on small government, pandemic effect; need to purchase buses