



COMMUNITY BRIEFS

DIAL-A-Ride to See Major Overhaul Next Year

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A popular Santa Monica car service that helps seniors get around town is getting a major overhaul. In April, Big Blue Bus's "Dial-A-Ride" moves into the smartphone age with a new name, MODE, and a partnership with Lyft.

The 34-year-old service is cheap – a one-way fare is just fifty cents – but often inconvenient. Due to the high demand, clients know to call days before they needed a pick-up, according to a report by the city's transit planning and performance manager. Clients often pay by doling out quarters when they get in the car.

With the \$2.4 million Lyft contract, Dial-A-Ride's 3,500 clients will be able to simply call a Lyft to receive the city-subsidized rides. The price will not go up but users will have to reregister. Clients must be residents and certified by WISE & Healthy Aging in order to qualify for the curb-to-curb paratransit service.

"We feel very strongly that this will provide better service to the community and the seniors here," said Ed King, BBB's director of transit services.

"That's the bottom line. We are one of the first in Southern California to launch this type of a partnership." It's not clear how many of MODE's future clients are living in the digital age – a recent study from the Pew Research Center found just four in ten seniors own a smartphone. Those most likely to have given up

their keys – those above 75 – are the least likely to own a phone that's capable of downloading an app (just 31 percent). Only 17 percent of Americans older than 80 have a smartphone.

The Big Blue Bus is developing a marketing and outreach plan to help existing customers adapt to the changing technology. Clients will begin receiving letters about the overhaul in February. There will also be in-person workshops at the Ken Edwards Center and the Disability Community Resource Center to train customers on how to register and use the Lyft app.

The City is betting clients will be happier with Lyft's efficiency once they get going with the new technology. Over the last year, Dial-A-Ride provided nearly 23,000 rides, averaging about two customers in the backseat per trip. On designated days and times, cars took seniors and disabled residents to eight medical and shopping destinations, with flexible evening service a few days a month and shopping excursions. Even with limited destinations, the service's call center struggled to move clients along efficient routes. While customers paid fifty cents, the cost to the City was about \$20 per ride – adding up to nearly half a million dollars a year.

The system was particularly strained on weekday mornings between nine and noon, when

demand overwhelmed the number of available cars.

"The situation is common knowledge among riders, and riders report being turned away for trips at those times on a routine basis," according to the report by Timothy McCormick. In the afternoon, Dial-A-Ride drivers sat idle, "accruing the same operating costs while providing few rides to clients. MODE's peak demand time will actually work well for Lyft drivers, who are looking for passengers between the early morning and evening work rush. Lyft drivers are required to undergo a criminal background check and an annual car inspection, according to the city report.

Those who do not use smart phones will call the BBB and request cars – the City-owned vehicles will still accept cash. The ten percent of Dial-A-Ride customers who are in a wheelchair or need door-through-door service for any reason will be transported in a City-owned vehicle driven by a BBB employee.

Dial-A-Ride currently runs Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and Sunday 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Call (310) 394-9871 for more information.