



# KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

AUGUST 2, 2021

## Follow-up on Paratransit Audit





**King County Metro Transit improved service monitoring for Access paratransit service and fully implemented several other recommendations resulting in improved service.** King County Metro Transit (KCMT) executed its contract management plan, reviewed the impact of contract incentives and disincentives, surveyed customers, and launched a mystery rider program since our last follow-up in April 2020. However, the significant impact of COVID-19 on ridership makes it difficult to determine the impact of incentives and disincentives on paratransit service. Paratransit demand fell by more than half from about 80,000 rides per month in January and February 2020 to fewer than 40,000 rides per month between April 2020 and March 2021. KCMT reported that cost per boarding averaged 65 percent higher than its goal of \$70.47, due to lower demand.

Overall, fewer than one percent of paratransit trips were excessively long in 2020, well below KCMT's three percent performance cap. In contrast, despite fewer trips, paratransit contractors did not reach KCMT's goal of zero untimely drop-offs and pickups, showing that disincentives in these areas may need adjustment.

In addition, KCMT completed its Equity Impact Review of paratransit and is developing next steps to better engage underserved customers, including those with limited-English proficiency. KCMT also aims to launch an online payment option for paratransit riders in the fourth quarter of 2021. Lastly, KCMT recently added real-time vehicle tracking to its online Access Trip Manager tool.

We will continue to monitor the four remaining recommendations on equity and online payment until they are complete.

Of the 17 audit recommendations:

	12 DONE		4 PROGRESS		0 OPEN		1 CLOSED
<b>Fully implemented</b> Auditor will no longer monitor.		<b>Partially implemented</b> Auditor will continue to monitor.		<b>Remain unresolved</b> Auditor will continue to monitor.		<b>No longer applicable</b> Auditor will no longer monitor.	

Please see details below for implementation status of each recommendation.

## Recommendation 1

DONE



**Transit should, on an ongoing basis, conduct an analysis aimed at optimizing the mix of service between the paratransit van service and alternatives, such as taxis.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT said that it has been holding quarterly meetings to discuss service mix with paratransit contractors since April 2020. Analysis prepared for the latest meeting on the first quarter of 2021 showed non-dedicated service providers, like taxis, accounted for 15 percent of paratransit trips. This is up five percentage points from 10 percent of trips during our audit.

IMPACT: Optimizing service mix can reduce the number of excessively long paratransit trips, as compared to fixed-route transit and lower KCMT's cost per trip. Fewer than one percent of paratransit trips were excessively long in 2020, well below the threshold that no more than three percent of trips be excessively long. In contrast, KCMT reported that cost per boarding averaged 65 percent higher than its goal of \$70.47 due to reduction in demand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Paratransit demand fell by more than half from about 80,000 rides per month in January and February 2020 to fewer than 40,000 rides per month from April 2020 to March 2021.

## Recommendation 2

On April 1, 2020

CLOSED



## Recommendation 3

DONE



**Transit should complete and execute a contract management plan for monitoring the new contracts. For each contract requirement, the plan should specify a) the method for verifying compliance, b) frequency of review, and c) staff member responsible.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT completed and executed its contract management plan covering performance from October 2019 to November 2024.

IMPACT: This plan guides staff on when and how to monitor paratransit performance to ensure service quality. Key monitoring areas include finance, operations, rider services, and safety. Monitoring helps ensure that KCMT and its riders receive the services we are paying for in the contract and that any issues are quickly identified.

## Recommendation 4

DONE



**Transit should monitor and enforce contract incentives and disincentives for a period of one year, and based on this work a) assess how they can more effectively improve productivity and performance, b) establish future dates to review them later in the five-year contract, and c) update the contract management plan to reflect these changes.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT conducted a review of contract incentives and disincentives for 2020 and updated its contract management plan to require annual reviews going forward.

IMPACT: Incentives and disincentives theoretically reinforce good performance and make poor performance expensive. However, if agencies do not refine them based on actual data, incentives and disincentives can increase cost without improving quality. In 2020, the impact of incentives and disincentives on paratransit service was difficult to tease out given the significant impact of COVID-19 on paratransit demand. Still, KCMT found that despite fewer trips, paratransit contractors did not reach the goal of zero untimely drop-offs and pickups, indicating that disincentives in these areas may need to be adjusted to achieve performance goals.

## Recommendation 5

DONE



**Transit should define excessively long trips in reference to fixed-route standards, regularly sample longer trips to count how many are excessively long, and take steps to make sure there is not a pattern of significant numbers of excessively long trips.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT defines “excessively long trips” as onboard time plus 15 minutes. In 2020, fewer than one percent of paratransit trips were excessively long—well below the three percent cap. In May 2021, KCMT again found fewer than one percent of trips (about 200 of 44,500 trips) to be excessively long.

IMPACT: KCMT’s new standard adds transparency and helps ensure that riders are not onboard for too long. Excessively long trips were one of the primary concerns expressed by paratransit riders in the 2016 rider survey.

## Recommendation 6

On April 1, 2020

DONE



## Recommendation 7

PROGRESS



**Transit should provide additional fare payment methods that take into account riders’ needs and trip frequency.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT is working with vendors to develop and launch an online payment option called EZ Wallet in the fourth quarter of 2021.

WHAT REMAINS: KCMT needs to release a new payment option to paratransit customers.

## Recommendation 8

PROGRESS



**Transit should work directly with King County communities to develop activities that will address barriers to the Access paratransit program for people with limited English proficiency.**

STATUS UPDATE: Language access was the focus of the Equity Impact Review of paratransit. As part of the review, KCMT asked key stakeholders how to reach linguistically diverse communities better. Stakeholder recommendations included partnerships to provide culturally relevant and

linguistically appropriate services, training for stakeholders to make referrals and offer technical assistance, and translation of brochures and applications into multiple languages.

WHAT REMAINS: KCMT needs to use the findings of the Equity Impact Review to make Access paratransit more visible and accessible to people with limited-English proficiency.

#### Recommendation 9

On April 1, 2020

DONE



#### Recommendation 10

DONE



**Transit should immediately take steps to implement an Equity Impact Review of the Access paratransit program.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT completed its Equity Impact Review of the Access paratransit program in the first half of 2020.

IMPACT: This review enabled KCMT to identify areas for improvement in the engagement of linguistically diverse communities, as discussed above in the update to recommendation 8.

#### Recommendation 11

PROGRESS



**Transit should use the results of the Equity Impact Review to find and engage with historically underserved populations.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT completed its Equity Impact Review and developed an engagement plan.

WHAT REMAINS: KCMT needs to implement its engagement plan.

#### Recommendation 12

PROGRESS



**Based on the Equity Impact Review and best practices, Transit should a) develop community impact measures for the Access paratransit program, b) include the metrics in its Access paratransit performance monitoring plan, and c) annually report on equitable access to the program.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT completed its Equity Impact Review and is drafting community impact measures. Transit plans to include the measures in its contract management plan.

WHAT REMAINS: KCMT needs to finalize its community impact measures, include them in its contract management plan, and report on them annually.

#### Recommendation 13

On April 1, 2020

DONE



## Recommendation 14

DONE



**Transit should gather feedback from active Access riders and prospective users on an annual basis and use this information to improve service quality.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT surveyed paratransit customers in 2019 and 2021. Based on survey feedback, KCMT started a newsletter to keep customers informed of service updates, gathered input on how to improve recurring ride requests, and added real-time vehicle tracking to its online Access Trip Manager tool.

IMPACT: Gathering feedback on a regular basis will help KCMT better understand rider experiences and make informed decisions about how to improve service quality.

## Recommendation 15

On April 1, 2020

DONE



## Recommendation 16

DONE



**Transit should conduct nonresponse analysis following its 2017 and future surveys, and use this information to improve response rates and participation of historically underserved populations.**

STATUS UPDATE: Following a nonresponse analysis, KCMT improved its survey tools and methods. For example, it added clear instructions on language access to the first page of its online survey, targeted riders with a preferred language other than English for interpretation-assisted phone surveys, and oversampled riders with limited-English proficiency among survey participants.

IMPACT: Increasing response rates of underserved groups will help KCMT better understand rider experiences and make equitable decisions about how to improve service quality.

## Recommendation 17

DONE



**Transit should supplement customer feedback and data reporting with direct observation such as a “mystery rider program” to ensure service quality.**

STATUS UPDATE: KCMT launched a mystery rider program in the fourth quarter of 2020.

IMPACT: The mystery rider program will help KCMT better understand rider experiences and make informed decisions about how to improve service quality without reliance on survey results that may not reflect the needs of all riders.

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Megan Ko conducted this review. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact the King County Auditor's Office at [KCAO@KingCounty.gov](mailto:KCAO@KingCounty.gov) or 206-477-1033.