

# MEETING SUMMARY

## Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged 2022 Vision Summit

Martin County Board of County Commissioners  
2401 SE Monterey Rd  
Stuart, Florida 34996

May 23, 2022  
9:00 AM

<i>Commissioners Present</i>	<i>Commissioners Absent</i>
Dr. Phillip Stevens, Chairman	Lillian Barrios
Donald Elwell	Christinne Gray
Renee Knight	
Dr. Robin Tellez	

<i>Advisors Present</i>	<i>Advisors Absent</i>
Liz Stutts, FDOT	Erica Floyd-Thomas, AHCA
Krysta Carter, DOEA	Dennis Latta, FDVA
	Kent Carroll, APD
	Diane Harris, DCF

*The Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged convened a “Vision Summit” in Stuart, Florida, to provide an orientation for new commissioners and discuss various issues impacting the Coordinated Transportation Disadvantaged System. No votes were taken during this event. The following is a summary of the discussion from the Vision Summit.*

### **Welcome and Introductions**

Chairman Stevens provided a welcome and discussed housekeeping items. He asked the Commissioners and Advisors to introduce themselves.

### **Organizational Values**

Mr. Darm provided overview of the organizational values of the Transportation Disadvantaged (TD) program. He provided his personal background as a person with a disability who is transportation disadvantaged. The TD Program provides access to transportation services for individuals with disabilities, low-income, and older adults, who rely on others to meet their mobility needs. The program is guided by five fundamental values:

- Access – empower individuals to have transportation available to access critical activities within the community.
- Innovation – encourage communities in finding solutions that best meet their constituents’ needs.

- Coordination – ensure state and local partners coordinate resources to deliver cost-effective services.
- Accountability – being good stewards of the taxpayer dollars.
- Transparency – share information through an inclusive, transparent process.

Mr. Darm provided an overview of the “DRIVE” objectives to help influence the future:

- Determine first the customer’s needs
- Research and test for new ideas
- Include partners in problem-solving
- Validate solutions with data
- Expect mistakes along the way

Mr. Darm provided an example of how a system mistake (of a provider organization discontinuing services) taught an invaluable lesson that helped the Commission more effectively respond to the financial impact of the pandemic. He encouraged the Commissioners and stakeholders to consider what they wanted to see for the future of the program.

Chairman Stevens emphasized the importance of seeing the implementation of these ideas, beyond the theoretical concepts being discussed.

Commissioner Tellez was concerned about the cost of living increases impacting individuals with lower income and how the Coordinated Transportation Disadvantaged System will respond to the unmet needs.

Commissioner Elwell was interested in finding the balance in meeting the diverse needs of the program. Not only has the program changed since 1993, but the program is also in a very different place since the pandemic. He said this is a constant quest of adapting to the changes.

Krysta Carter was interested in seeing the impact of agency partnerships and where there could be more collaboration in the coming years.

Liz Stutts echoed Mr. Darm’s point about being willing to make mistakes to improve the program. She also emphasized the importance of learning from the history, which will empower the system to make better decisions on new practices.

### **New Commission Board Member Orientation**

Rachelle Munson, Commission General Counsel, provided a presentation on the Government in the Sunshine Law, which governs the communication and rule development activities of the Commission. All Commission Business Meetings, including the information discussed, must be made available to the general public. Board members are not allowed to communicate privately with each other, including via text, social media, etc. Commission meetings are recorded, and minutes are made available to the public. Every meeting agenda includes an opportunity for members of the public to comment.

Ms. Munson discussed the public records request process. She provided an overview of the voting process for board members, including disclosure of conflicts of interest.

Krysta Carter asked if there was a time limit for retention of Commission-related documents (i.e., how far back in history are documents retained?). Mr. Darm was not aware of a specific length of time public records had to be retained, but the Commission has retained documents for over 10 years.

Chair Stevens said there are specific provisions on the length of time certain records need to be retained, but it has been far more expansive since the digital age. He asked Ms. Munson to clarify the procedures on disclosing conflicts of interest. Ms. Munson said some boards just require that the conflict be made on the record at public meetings, but she agreed with Chair Stevens that the board should retain the disclosure form as well.

The Commission took a break.

### **TD 101 – An Overview of the Coordinated System**

Mr. Darm presented an overview of the Coordinated Transportation Disadvantaged Program. He posed two questions: 1) what is the Commission's role in supporting transportation services for its customers; and 2) what is the role of the collective system in coordinating transportation services for the Commission's customers?

The "Transportation Disadvantaged" (TD) population includes individuals with disabilities, persons with low-income, older adults, and children who are at-risk. They must demonstrate a barrier to transportation, due to age, income or disability. The program supports access to various activities, including medical, employment, grocery stores, etc. The Commission is the statewide policy board that oversees the program, which is implemented by three organizations at the local level: Community Transportation Coordinators (CTCs), Designated Official Planning Agencies (Planners), and Local Coordinating Boards (LCBs). The Commission administers the TD Trust Fund, which supports the coordination of services through its grant programs.

CTCs are responsible for the delivery of TD services in a county or multi-county service area. They can be a transit agency, not-for-profit organization, for-profit company or a local government body. The Planner is responsible for facilitating the procurement of the CTC, which is designated by the Commission. The LCB represents various stakeholders impacted by the program (state agencies, rider advocates, the workforce development system, etc.), which is chaired by an elected official. In addition to these organizations, the Commission works with agencies (e.g., the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Department of Elder Affairs, etc.) to purchase services through the coordinated system to serve segments of the TD population (known as "purchasing agencies").

Commissioner Elwell shared about his experiences serving as the chair of the LCB in DeSoto, Hardee, Highlands, and Okeechobee Counties.

Ms. Stutts said the Florida Department of Transportation is not a “purchasing agency”, though it was identified as one on the slide presentation: she said FDOT supports the deficit of public transportation agencies. Mr. Darm clarified that FDOT is identified as a “purchasing agency” in Chapter 427, Florida Statutes. He said the “purchase” could include more than just trips for clients, such as capital equipment.

Ms. Carter discussed the Florida Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA) grant programs serving older adults. Commissioner Knight, who formerly worked for a CTC Council on Aging, stated the DOEA partners worked with the coordinated system to provide meals-on-wheels and transportation to senior programs, but they have become less engaged with the system over the years.

Mr. Darm said he wanted to see more engagement with the state “purchasing agency” partners, including the workforce development system.

Ms. Munson clarified that Chapter 427, F.S., defines a “purchasing agency” as an organization that serves as an ex-officio, non-voting advisor to the Commission, which include FDOT, or an agency that purchases transportation for the TD population.

The Commission took a break for lunch.

### **The Future of Coordinated Public Transportation**

David Darm kicked off the Stakeholder Roundtable Discussion with an overview of the Commission’s priorities and major challenges confronting the Coordinated Transportation Disadvantaged System. Prior to this event, Commission staff attended the national conference hosted by the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), where the workforce shortage crisis (a.k.a. “The Great Resignation”) was one of the primary issues discussed. Public transportation agencies are struggling to recruit and retain drivers and other essential workers (supply), which in turn is negatively impacting their ability to deliver transit and paratransit services (demand). Historically, the public transportation industry has prioritized the operational needs of transit (i.e., fixed bus route) services; however, there has been a steady decrease in ridership in transit services since the beginning of the pandemic, while paratransit services continue to experience a steady increase in ridership. This challenge is compounded by similar issues occurring in the market, including inflation, rising gas prices, and supply shortages for capital equipment.

Mr. Darm discussed some of the priorities for the upcoming state fiscal year. The Commission will be exploring ways to improve the validation process of its performance data, collected in the Annual Operating Report (AOR), which is reported to the Governor and Legislature at the end of each year. The Commission will also be examining insights gained from the services being funded under the Innovative Services Development (ISD) Grant, with the intent of promoting greater innovations across the system. Mr. Darm encouraged the stakeholder participants to share some of the strategies they are implementing to address the workforce challenges and other issues impacting the TD Program.

Chairman Stevens was interested in any data, such as exit interviews, to identify some key indicators to this problem.

Jeannie Chrisman from MTM (formerly worked for MV Transportation) in Palm Beach discussed the worker shortage issue. Their hourly wage for drivers, which was \$13.50 two years ago, is now \$15.50, and she anticipated it would increase to \$17.50. Many drivers are passionate about serving people with disabilities and want to stay but cannot afford to support their families with rising rent, gas prices, and groceries. MTM has implemented retention and referral bonuses that an employee can receive during the first year of retention. They have been working with churches and workforce development centers to recruit new employees. But they are struggling to compete with the Post Office, Amazon, UPS. The turnover is higher in the urban areas compared to rural. She said loyalty between employees and management is important, but not enough when the rent has increased to about 60% in Palm Beach County.

Chairman Stevens asked Ms. Chrisman if their employees were without work during the initial response to the pandemic. She said Palm Beach County continued to provide services and they did not have to lay off any of their employees.

Commissioner Elwell echoed concerns about the rise in cost of living. He wanted to encourage stakeholders to share their best practices (like the retention bonuses) with the broader system. Mr. Darm said the Commission's annual conference will be a good venue for such discussions.

Ms. Chrisman said another strategy has been to recruit retired drivers back into the workforce to fill in for the shortage.

Mr. Darm was curious how transportation organizations were recruiting younger workers. He heard the phrase: "Young people don't want to work these jobs," but noticed many of his Uber and Lyft drivers were in that age demographic.

Chairman Stevens asked if there were age restrictions for hiring drivers. Ms. Chrisman said insurance regulations require the minimum age of 21. In response to Mr. Darm's comment, Ms. Chrisman said younger people prefer to work for Uber and Lyft where they can set their own hours, whereas paratransit operates on a more traditional, 8-hour schedule.

Lou Ferri from PalmTran (Palm Beach County) said one of the challenges with hiring young workers is many are not passing the drug tests. Further, PalmTran bids out its paratransit services, so the drivers get the worst hours (i.e., early in the morning). Palm Beach has two paratransit (subcontracted) provider organizations. For Palm Beach to meet its 90% on-time performance, they need 226 runs each day from just one of those providers. Mr. Ferri said they are currently averaging about 115-175 runs per day. Palm Beach is down about 120 drivers (60 drivers per provider).

Chairman Stevens asked Mr. Ferri to clarify that decline compared to the full driver workforce for those agencies. Mr. Ferri said one provider needs a total of 226 drivers (full and part-time). He did not know what the solution to this problem should be – it has

impacted several service industries – but he believed some workers do not want to deal with difficult customers. Mr. Ferri said Palm Beach County’s hourly wage for paratransit drivers is \$15.50, which is higher than the wage of transit drivers (at \$15 an hour). Traditionally, transit bus drivers are paid more than paratransit drivers because they must have a Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) to operate a bus. Palm Beach is down 38 transit drivers, which is causing routes to be delayed. He echoed Ms. Chrisman’s comment that the increase in the cost of living is forcing many to work for other organizations that can pay higher wages.

Mr. Ferri discussed the TD Rate Model, which is the methodology used by CTCs to negotiate the rate of reimbursement of non-sponsored trips (purchased by the Commission) each year. Palm Beach captured their cost in the previous year’s proposed rates (i.e., \$112 wheelchair, \$76 ambulatory), but those costs were too high and would lower the number of trips that could be purchased under the Trip & Equipment Grant.

Mr. Darm provided an overview of the TD Rate Model. Each year, the Commission’s funding formula determines the allocation for each county to deliver Transportation Disadvantaged services under the Trip & Equipment Grant program. The CTC in turn negotiates a rate (i.e., price) to purchase trips for the year. Mr. Darm said the program is statutorily required to be “cost-effective”, which is measured (under the formula) by the reimbursement rates. However, that does not necessarily reflect the costs incurred by the CTC.

Mr. Ferri said the rate model was created by the Commission to show the actual costs to deliver TD trips. Palm Beach captures the costs of labor, purchase of vehicles, overhead, etc. It was his understanding that the rate model was originally intended to report the costs to the Legislature, where they could determine whether more money was needed in the TD Trust Fund. However, when Palm Beach submitted an increased rate for FY21-22, the Commission staff informed the CTC that they would not be able to purchase as many trips, which would lower the county’s allocation in future years under the new funding formula. The CTC in turn had to revise the rates to secure similar levels of funding for future years.

Mr. Ferri explained that the county is required to match the allocated amount by 10%. Though a county could choose to purchase more trips (beyond its 90/10% match), the new formula only accounts for the trips that were purchased under the grant’s total allocated amount. Mr. Ferri said Palm Beach is fortunate that the county does not deny trips, but other counties impose trip limits to remain within the funding allocation.

Julia Davis from Polk County Transportation Planning Organization spoke on the TD Rate Model. She said the model was developed back when the Medicaid program and other agencies were purchasing trips through the CTCs. It was a larger pot of money and a larger delivery of trips. Once the Medicaid program was reformed [under a managed care model], Ms. Davis said the costs of the TD program went up. Either the Commission should figure out how to bring back the purchasing agencies or revise the manuals and requirements to reflect the current status of the Coordinated System. She

encouraged the Commission to hold the line on coordination – don't let any other purchasing agencies leave the system.

Lina Aragon from PalmTran said the public transportation industry has changed and the system has not caught up with the times. In addition to the wage challenges, the industry is highly regulated due to the vulnerable population being served. She stated Transportation Network Companies (TNCs), which are part of the industry, are not regulated at the same level as transit/paratransit agencies. For example, paratransit drivers must undergo Level 2 background screening, drug tests, and have a driver's license for a minimum of three years, while TNC drivers are not required to follow these same regulations. However, some paratransit riders can choose to be served by TNCs at their own risk.

Ms. Aragon also discussed the use of micro-transit. Palm Beach County is the largest county east of the Mississippi River, which presents challenges in meeting the ever-growing demands on paratransit services. She said micro-transit may be a more realistic model to address this challenge. Though she wished they could meet all the needs of the community. Ms. Aragon said it is better to provide a high-quality service to 10 people with greater need than provide a mediocre service to 100 people.

Chairman Stevens echoed Ms. Aragon's comment about considering the various needs of the population, including the trip purpose (health care, employment, shopping, etc.).

Scott Clark from Hillsborough County Sunshine Line said they are currently operating under 50% capacity of drivers. He said there are three facets to this issue: cultural, industry, and organizational. The cultural aspect is difficult to influence – many of these services cannot be provided through a virtual medium. But as an industry, agencies could reframe the discussion, where people do not perceive being a driver as a dead-end job. The industry could promote the various growth opportunities that can come from being a driver, such as dispatcher, supervisor, planner, manager, executive, etc. He wanted to see the industry promote transit as a career path, which could be highlighted among the state agencies (e.g., Department of Education, CareerSource Florida, etc.). Organizationally, transit agencies need to treat drivers as career positions – not entry-level jobs. Despite all the requirements and trainings drivers have to go through, he said the wage is equivalent to other entry-level jobs (like Wawa). He said agencies are going to need to open the pocketbook and figure out how to invest more in retention.

Chairman Stevens discussed the importance of career paths. He said the construction industry has found success in recruiting high schoolers to enter internships after graduation, where they are given opportunities to pursue various positions on a two-year track.

Krysta Carter was interested in further discussion of the rates. Mr. Darm said the Commission could facilitate more discussions on the funding formula and rate model, as there appears to be a lot of interest in the performance variable, which is tied to the rates.

Marybeth Soderstrom from Heartland Regional Transportation Planning Organization said her service area (including DeSoto, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, Highlands, and Okeechobee Counties) does not include a fixed bus route, so the primary mode of services is door-to-door, demand-response. Approximately 40% of those services are for dialysis treatment and other life-sustaining activities.

Mr. Darm asked if Ms. Soderstrom could speak on any issues related to the Planning Grant program. Ms. Soderstrom wanted to look at the requirements of planning documents to see where there is overlap between the various funding partners (i.e., the Transportation Disadvantaged Service Plan (TDSP) compared to Transit Development Plan). She said this could be coordinated at the state level and help reduce duplicative requirements. Ms. Soderstrom also suggested the Commission consider revising the CTC designation requirements to be similar to the planning agency (one-time) designation. She believed this could save the program time and funds to be used in more meaningful ways.

Julia Davis spoke to the differences between the TDSP and other planning documents. The challenge would be to synchronize the timelines (June 30, September 1, etc.). She said it takes years for a planner to learn how these various documents work together. Most of these documents are required in order for a service area to receive funding – if a project is not included within the plan, it is difficult for a community to obtain funding. The other challenge is to understand all the funding streams, both at the federal and state level. She spoke to the importance of coordination among the various planning agencies across the state. She said the funding for the Planning Grant covers the equivalent of a part-time position.

Ms. Davis wanted to see more marketing efforts funded under the grant programs. This would increase awareness of services.

Lou Ferri said there are differences between urban and rural systems, but the TD Program should treat them equally. Some urbanized counties like Palm Beach have rural areas within the service area.

Nancy Weizman from Broward County CTC wanted to continue these discussions at the Commission annual conference, including the rate model and invoicing. Broward County also overmatches its local share of the Trip & Equipment Grant, which is not captured under the new funding formula. She wanted to see the TD trips being delivered beyond what is allocated by the grant. Similar to Palm Beach, Broward County's CTC had to revise its rate model to ensure they would not receive a reduction in their allocated amount for future years. Ms. Weizman suggested the TD Program become a block grant program, which would provide more flexibility for the CTCs.

Mr. Darm spoke to Ms. Weizman's comment about capturing trips provided beyond the Trip & Equipment Grant allocation. He said the Annual Operating Report is intended to capture these trips, but there are major challenges to the validity of data reported in that system (which was why the AOR was removed from the funding formula). However, if the Commission can improve the data validation process within the AOR, Mr. Darm believed this issue could be explored in future discussions.



Chairman Stevens said he has heard some rural stakeholders say: “I don’t agree with the urban systems, but I am not going to waste my time [speaking up].” He wanted to see all the systems involved in the discussion, where stakeholders are encouraged to speak candidly. Ms. Weizman appreciated the Commission facilitating this kind of discussion.

Charlene Burke from Broward County MPO spoke about some the workforce recruitment efforts occurring in their community. They have been working with Trek and Rides program and FDOT’s construction career days. She wanted to see more efforts to recruit high school students who are preparing to graduate. She said they provide a course called “Think Like a Planner,” which gives students hands-on experience in urban development. She thought this concept could be applied in public transportation.

### **Introduction to Project GROW**

Mr. Darm provided an overview of the Commission’s growth initiative. He emphasized the importance of sustainability as many are retiring or leaving the Coordinated System. Each of the letters in the word “GROW” stands for an objective:

1. Gain a fundamental knowledge of the program
2. Research and test for new ideas
3. Operate like a business, but think like a teacher
4. Wow the customers with what we do

The first objective is intended to promote cross-training and knowledge that can empower stakeholders to gain a better understanding of how each of their roles are interconnected. The second objective encourages the use of best practices and new ideas that can improve the program’s mission. The third objective addresses issues like the rate model, funding, and other factors that must be considered as part of the operation of delivering services to the TD population. Mr. Darm said it is important to have a teaching mentality that encourages people to learn and grow in these areas. The final objective is intended to promote the program’s mission and demonstrate how these efforts are having an impact on the TD Population.

Mr. Darm closed with a quote from Steve Jobs: “Humans are tool builders, and we build tools that can dramatically amplify our innate human abilities.” He said everyone within the Coordinated System has a role to play in helping individuals who are transportation disadvantaged become more independent and engaged in their community.

Chairman Stevens thanked everyone for participating in the Vision Summit.