

Prince George's County Launches On-Demand Rideshare Service

By Perrin Palistrant, PRTC's Director of Operations and Operations Planning

On November 9, Prince George's County launched a six (6)-month pilot program that provides flexible transportation options in Prince George's County, Maryland. Specifically, this service is being provided in the Fort Washington Area, including areas such as National Harbor. After the pilot is concluded, there is a possibility this becomes part of the regular service provided by the Prince George's County Department of Public Works and Transportation division.

Like other rideshare services, "Prince George's Link" uses a smartphone app for riders to schedule customized curb-to-curb microtransit trips. A small neighborhood-friendly bus will pick riders up and drop them off anywhere within the defined service boundaries. Along the way, the bus may pick up other passengers who also request service. Social distancing will be enforced, and passengers and transit operators are required to wear face coverings.

To use the new rideshare program, passengers must first download the free TransLoc app from the Google Play or Apple iOS store prior to requesting a ride. The app will provide estimated pick-up times, track vehicles in real-time, and alert customers when their ride is about to arrive. Passengers will also be notified when they are approaching their desired destination.

The cost of the service is \$2.00 per trip, the same fare as for fixed route transit, making "Prince George's Link" more affordable than traditional rideshare services, which could cost riders more than five times the amount for a similar trip.

Wait times for service are subject to vehicle availability and demand. The fleet of vehicles the County uses includes a lift to accommodate riders with disabilities, strollers and mobility devices.

So what? How will Rideshare and Flexible Transportation affect OmniRide?

In January 2020, fixed route bus service to the Town of Quantico was disrupted by a sudden increase in security to enter the Quantico Marine Base. Prior to the change in security protocol, OmniRide's buses were allowed to enter the base once passing through the guard checkpoint by showing their ID or driver's license, and passengers were free to enter on the grounds of the base so long as they had proper identification. However, the increase in security now requires every person to have a Defense Biometric Identification System card (DBIDS).

Each transit system employee and user of the transit system that will enter the base would need to apply for the identification system card at the Marine Base Visitor Control Center. New operators and road supervisors would also need to have the proper DBIDS credentials to travel on base. The constant change in employees who need to go on and off the base, plus requiring each passenger to have this ID poses many challenges. However, a short term solution was created.

In February, soon after the increase in security began, OmniRide partnered with Yellow Cab of Prince William County, to provide a taxi shuttle from the bus stop in the Town of Quantico, to the nearest local bus stop on Route 1 at Squire Lane. Both the bus stop in the Town as well as the stop at Squire Lane have a bus shelter and bench to provide seating and shelter while waiting for either the taxi or the bus. Passengers ride for free in the cab and pay the fare on the bus (currently the bus fare is free due to COVID-19 operational changes) and OmniRide pays Yellow Taxi the total metered fare for these rides.

As this program evolves, there are opportunities for OmniRide to modify the program to better serve Town of Quantico residents, as well as employees and residents of the Quantico Marine Base. Discussions have been taking place with the base regarding an on-demand system to travel throughout the large footprint of the base, and a recent Town Hall with the Mayor of Quantico and its residents touched on ideas to create a more robust system that either operates more regularly, expands the service area where the flexible transportation system would travel, as well as a host of other ideas. Continued dialogue will take place as we learn more about this type of system.

Flexible on-demand transportation could assist OmniRide in a number of other ways, such as evening, weekend, or in other parts of the OmniRide service area where densities may be lower, but there is a demand for some type of transit. As we continue to evaluate the success of the western restructuring, flexible services could also be an option for certain areas in western Prince William County.

The impacts of increased security on the Marine Base, as well as changes in ridership patterns created by the pandemic, have allowed for transit systems to seek alternatives to providing the typical transit offerings. Having a flexible system allows agencies to modify more quickly and adapt to changing conditions, while being good stewards of public funds.