

CHAPTER 7

# Initial Public and Stakeholder Input

# Initial Public and Stakeholder Input

Three rounds of outreach and engagement activities were held over the course of the Transit Development Plan Update study. Each round corresponded to a key inflection point in the project. The first round of outreach and engagement began in January 2023 with a focus on gathering input from current riders and BARTA/RRTA stakeholders on the ways they use transit, reasons for riding, opinions on current service, and priorities for future service. The first round of outreach and engagement included the following elements:

- Two in-person public meetings held in Reading and Lancaster, and two virtual public meetings held via Microsoft Teams but focused on the BARTA and RRTA service areas, respectively.
- In-person focus-group meetings held with BARTA and RRTA stakeholders, respectively. Attendees included representatives from local planning departments, universities, and other city and county staff members.
- Listening sessions with BARTA and RRTA drivers and operations staff.
- A community survey distributed online and at public meetings.
- An on-board passenger survey for BARTA and RRTA customers.
- A shared-ride survey and agency interviews for BARTA and RRTA shared-ride customers and service providers.

The input collected in the first round of outreach and engagement helped inform the assessment of current service and the development of preliminary service improvement scenarios for BARTA and RRTA. Full summaries from the Phase 1 engagement activities are included in **Appendix E** and **Appendix F**.

## Public Meetings

To solicit feedback from the public about BARTA and RRTA services, SCTA held four public meetings in Phase 1 of engagement: one in-person and one virtual meeting for each agency. Overall, 23 individuals participated in public meetings for BARTA and 41 individuals participated in public meetings for RRTA (**Table 9**).

**Table 9: Public Meetings Held for TDP Development**

MEETING NAME	DATE AND TIME	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
BARTA in-person meeting	January 25, 2023: 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.	6
BARTA virtual meeting	February 1, 2023: 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.	17
RRTA in-person meeting	January 26, 2023: 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.	23
RRTA virtual meeting	February 2, 2023 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.	18

Several key themes emerged from the public meetings, such as the need for:

- Improvements in information for customers, including more accurate real-time location information and integration with Google Transit.
- More service on nights and weekends.
- Consistent application of the system’s flag stop policy.
- Additional options for traveling to, and between, outlying areas on SCTA buses.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM PUBLIC MEETINGS

Comments made at the meetings are summarized below, grouped by agency.

### BARTA

Overall, participants approved of the way the system serves riders with disabilities. They also appreciated the friendliness and professionalism of BARTA drivers.

Although BARTA received some positive feedback during the meetings, participants also indicated areas for growth. While some participants praised BARTA’s mobile app and customer information, others reported that the system was difficult for visitors from out of town to understand and noted that agency information is not available via Google Transit. Participants also suggested that BARTA conduct additional marketing to attract riders by emphasizing cleanliness and types of service that are available. In addition, meeting participants said that additional late night and weekend service would be valuable and requested additional passenger amenities like bus shelters. Attendees also said they’d like to see improved coordination between BARTA and other entities, such as municipalities and government agencies, on issues such as stop placement, land use coordination, and service expansion.

Several meeting participants also expressed interest in improved service to outlying areas, including potentially creating new transfer sites outside of downtown Reading. Some service recommendations from meeting participants included:

- New service to Kutztown.
- Direct service between Sinking Spring and Spring Ridge.
- Service to Laureldale (to provide access to Yuasa Battery).
- Service to Douglassville, Boyertown, and Pottstown, to provide connections to Pottstown Area Rapid Transit (PART) in neighboring Montgomery County, PA.

### RRTA

Meeting attendees said they appreciated the simplification of transit fares and expressed appreciation for the friendliness of operators and the cleanliness of vehicles. Participants were split on the reliability of RRTA service, while some expressed concerns about how often buses arrive early.

Participants said they’d like to see improvements in customer information systems, including integration with Google Transit. Some meeting participants also noted that the MyStop app does not provide accurate bus arrival time information. Others expressed concern that some riders may not be able to use the app; for example, the app is not accessible to people with visual impairments, as the text does not resize.

In addition, meeting attendees suggested additional service on nights and weekends, to the Amtrak station, as well as to and between outlying areas, in particular to Elizabethtown, Manheim, Lititz, and eastern Lancaster County. Participants also expressed a desire for more customer amenities like shelters and benches at bus stops. One meeting attendee also indicated that information at bus stops is posted too high, making it difficult for people in wheelchairs to read.

Meeting attendees also reported that bus operators disagree about what locations are acceptable for flag stops, which has produced uncertainty about how and where to pick up the bus in rural areas. Further, one participant suggested RRTA adopt clockface headways on routes to improve the legibility of the service, and several participants expressed interest in microtransit to provide some transit service to outlying areas.

In addition to comments about RRTA's fixed-route service, some meeting participants provided feedback on Red Rose Access, RRTA's service for seniors and customers with disabilities. Meeting participants said that operators and dispatchers do not always provide a positive customer experience. In addition, meeting participants noted that Red Rose Access customers sometimes wait one or two hours for a pick-up.

## Stakeholder Meetings

In addition to public meetings, SCTA conducted meetings with institutional stakeholders to solicit input on how to improve transit service in Berks and Lancaster counties. The main themes that emerged from those meetings were:

- A need to improve access to employment sites and educational institutions via fixed-route bus service or microtransit service.
- A desire to increase connections between outlying areas and to other parts of the region.
- A concern over the limitations of SCTA's customer information systems.

## BARTA STAKEHOLDER MEETING SUMMARY

The stakeholder engagement meeting for BARTA was held on January 25, 2023, from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. The institutions represented at the meeting included:

- Abilities in Motion
- Berks County Planning Commission/RATS
- Berks County Workforce Investment Board
- City of Reading
- Commuter Services of Pennsylvania
- Gage Personnel
- Reading Area Community College (RACC)
- Reading School District
- Sinking Spring Borough

Participants reported that BARTA does a good job maintaining a functional and clean fleet of vehicles and is perceived as safe and competent; however, attendees also noted a few opportunities for improvement. These opportunities include:

- New and increased service, including potentially microtransit service, to employment sites in lower-density and non-residential areas such as the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Shartlesville, East Penn Manufacturing in Lyons, the I-78 corridor, the US-222 corridor west of Kutztown, and Morgantown.
- More frequent and direct service to serve students in the Reading School District, including transportation for students with internships and “courtesy students” who live less than two miles from school and are not provided bus transportation by the district.
- Expanded service to additional educational facilities, such as the Reading Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center and the Reading Area Community College, and recreation sites.
- Connections to transit service in neighboring jurisdictions, like RRTA in Lancaster, Lebanon County Transit, Pottstown Area Rapid Transit (PART), Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), and Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority (LANTA).
- Improvements to customer information, including a more user-friendly and accessible mobile app.
- Improvements to bus shelters and other passenger amenities.

In addition, one meeting participant noted that Sinking Spring Borough is interested in the development of a new bus hub as part of its redevelopment plan to help address chronic congestion.

## RRTA STAKEHOLDER MEETING SUMMARY

The stakeholder engagement meeting for RRTA was held on January 26, 2023, from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. The institutions represented at the meeting included:

- Eurofins
- Sauder’s Eggs
- Elizabethtown College
- City of Lancaster
- Lancaster City Alliance
- Lancaster County
- Lancaster Chamber
- Commuter Services of Pennsylvania
- Millersville University
- Elizabethtown Borough
- Lancaster County Planning Department

Participants praised RRTA for providing a valued service with limited funds, and for effectively partnering with other entities in the community. Suggestions for improvements to service included:

- Providing additional service to and between outlying areas to reduce the need to transfer at the system's hub in Downtown Lancaster.
- Improving bus stops by providing new benches, shelters, sidewalks, and lighting, and more effectively maintaining, repairing, and cleaning existing facilities.
- Refining the system for employer-provided transit benefits.
- Improving customer information, including integration with Google Transit and improving RRTA's mobile app for trip planning, monitoring, and fare payment.
- Launching a new marketing campaign to attract new riders and change the perception; attendees suggested using social media.
- Improving coordination between parking, transit, bike share, and microtransit to help boost ridership.

Participants also requested new or additional service to several locations, including Hershey, Elizabethtown, Millersville, and the Ware Center.

## Listening Sessions

The project team held listening sessions with BARTA and RRTA front-line staff to gain feedback on each system's service from operators, shift leads, and dispatchers. The BARTA listening session was held at BARTA headquarters on January 25, 2023 from 12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., and the RRTA listening session was held at RRTA headquarters on January 26, 2023 from 12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

While operators noted challenges specific to the service they operate, some key themes emerged across both listening sessions.

- Maintaining route schedules is difficult given the limited number of buses and drivers available and tight schedules.
- Improving communication between operators and transit center staff is needed to ensure the correct information goes out to passengers.
- Existing scheduling of routes makes transfers difficult for passengers.

## BARTA OPERATOR LISTENING SESSION SUMMARY

BARTA Operators and other operations staff brought up several key issues during the listening session.

- Pulse periods are too short for passengers to find and make connections.
- Sunday service is difficult for operators; there are too few buses and not enough time to stay on schedule.
- Maintaining schedules is difficult on some routes.
  - Route 8 (Reiffon/Shelbourne Square/Birdsboro) and Route 19 (Riverside/First Energy/Cotton St.) are challenging on trips with variants.
  - Some Route 18 (Schuylkill Avenue) trips are scheduled for 30 minutes instead of 40.
- Unmarked bus stops create conflict and confusion. It is not always clear to operators if a pedestrian on the street is waiting for the bus, and passengers ask to be let off the bus in places operators are

uncomfortable stopping.

- Keeping marked stops free of parked cars is difficult.
- Operating in retail centers is challenging for drivers due to conflicts with cars and difficult pedestrian conditions.
- Pigeons pose a health threat to passengers and employees at the transit center.
- Information provided to passengers at ticket windows at the transit center is not always accurate.
- Passengers are interested in service to the casino.

BARTA operators also noted that there is a shortage of paratransit operators. In addition, the software used by BARTA's paratransit service will push trips to drivers that are not logical or realistic. The geographic location of the operator and the realistic time it takes to travel from one location to another are not well considered in the software.

## RRTA OPERATOR LISTENING SESSION SUMMARY

Key issues brought up by RRTA operators and operations staff regarding fixed-route service include:

- Information provided to passengers at ticket windows at the transit center is not always accurate.
- On-time performance is difficult to maintain on Sundays for all routes.
- Queen Street Station does not have sufficient amenities for operators, including an adequate number of bathrooms or parking spaces for operators to use.
- Shifts do not always start and end at the same location.
- Queen Street Station would benefit from enhanced security at night.
- Ephrata requires more transit coverage and could possibly serve as a connection point to BARTA.
- Passengers are interested in north/south service on Centerville Road.
- Some routes have confusing and/or inefficient routing.
  - Route 1 (Park City A-Southeast) operates both north and south of Queen Street Station, so passengers often board the bus in the wrong direction.
  - Route 3 (Park City C-8<sup>th</sup> Ward) is very circuitous and serves too many stops, making it difficult to stay on schedule and forcing out-of-direction travel for passengers.
- Some routes could benefit from service and alignment changes.
  - Route 2 (Park City B-6<sup>th</sup> Ward) should operate closer to the Wegman's to provide a better connection to a grocery store.
  - Route 6 (Downtown Lancaster Loop) has very low ridership.
  - Route 10 (Lititz) would benefit from Sunday service and later weekday spans to accommodate new development along the alignment.
  - Route 14 (Rockvale Outlets) has a hard time serving the farside stop at Greenland Drive on Lincoln Highway because cars in the turn lane often go straight through the intersection. In addition, crossing from Lincoln Highway into East Town Centre is very dangerous. Buses have to cross

without a signal over a highway exit ramp to enter the shopping center and cross-traffic moves fast.

- Route schedules could be improved to facilitate transfers.

## Community Survey

In addition to targeted stakeholder meetings and public outreach, an online survey collected feedback about transit service from the public. Separate surveys were created in English and Spanish for BARTA and RRTA; however, the questions across the two surveys remained consistent. The surveys were available online from January to February 2023 and received a total of 525 responses. About 31 percent of the responses were from regular riders, who ride transit at least weekly; 24 percent from occasional riders, who ride transit less than weekly; and 45 percent from non-riders, who reported never riding transit. Throughout this report, the term “riders” includes regular riders and occasional riders.

The surveys asked respondents to provide basic demographic information, details about their transit usage, information about their most common transit trip (if applicable), opinions about existing service, preferences for future service, and demographics.

## KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

Several key themes and findings emerged from the summary and analysis of the community survey responses, including the following. A full summary of the survey findings are available in **Appendix E**.

- Survey participants who are transit riders typically do not have access to a car and mostly use BARTA and RRTA services to commute to work.
- Survey respondents are generally satisfied with RRTA and BARTA service but expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with telephone customer service and the availability of service on nights and weekends.
- Survey participants said they’d prioritize increasing frequency of buses during peak periods over expanding weekday service or running buses on more streets.

## FREE RESPONSES

The survey also asked respondents for other comments regarding BARTA and RRTA service. The most-commonly mentioned issues and concerns raised by respondents are summarized here.

### Increase in frequency of buses and span of service

Respondents requested an increase in weekend and late-night bus service as well as an increase in bus frequency.

### Requests for specific new routes

Many responses included suggestions for new routes and destinations, including:

- Strasburg
- Denver
- Oregon Dairies



- Quarryville
- Kutztown
- Bethel
- Pottstown, PA
- Oley
- Allentown
- Lebanon
- Service between Reading and Lancaster

## Concerns about behavior of SCTA employees

Survey respondents expressed concern about the behavior of BARTA and RRTA operators and customer service representatives, complaining of rudeness and unsafe driving.

## Improved bus stops and shelters

A common theme of the survey responses was the need for improved bus stops. Commenters requested additional shelters for protection from the elements as well as better signage to make it easier to find stops. Several respondents said they had difficulty flagging down stops in outlying areas.

## Additional service between outlying areas

Commenters said they would appreciate being able to travel between areas of Berks and Lancaster Counties without needing to travel downtown to transfer between buses.

## Improved rider information

Riders said they would appreciate additional information, including notifications about missed trips and delays, as well as improved trip planning functionality like Google transit.

## Increased access to jobs

Both employees and employers said they'd like to see more access to job centers, like the Amazon warehouse in Hamburg.

## Reliability of bus service

Several riders said they'd missed their bus because the buses were running ahead of schedule. Others expressed frustration about late service and missed trips.

## Access to medical institutions

Providing access to medical facilities, in particular Penn State Lancaster Medical Center, was a priority of multiple commenters.

# On-board Survey

SCTA conducted a paper survey onboard buses on each system asking riders about their satisfaction with the services offered by BARTA and RRTA, respectively, as well as basic demographic information for Title VI analysis. SCTA ran the on-board survey from January 17, 2023 through February 3, 2023 and collected 1,097 complete surveys, 582 from RRTA riders and 485 from BARTA riders. Of these surveys, 39 BARTA riders and 38 RRTA riders completed the survey in Spanish. The following provides an overview of results of the survey. A detailed summary of the survey is available in **Appendix C**.

## HIGH-LEVEL RESULTS

### Rider Satisfaction

In the survey, rider satisfaction was measured across a series of several metrics. More than 75 percent of RRTA riders are satisfied with RRTA service overall. RRTA Riders are most satisfied with the safety from accidents, the availability of bus schedules, safety from crime while riding, and the availability of seats on the bus, while they are least satisfied with the frequency of weekend service and the time the service ends at night.

Close to 80 percent of all BARTA riders are satisfied with BARTA service overall. BARTA riders are most satisfied with their safety from accidents, the availability of bus schedules, the safety from crime while riding, and the ease of understanding bus schedules. BARTA riders were least satisfied with the frequency of weekend service and the time the service ends at night.

### Service Improvement Preferences

Like in the online community survey, riders were asked a series of tradeoff questions to identify their preferences for service improvements. Riders were asked about five different scenarios:

- Fewer bus stops along a route for faster bus travel versus more bus stops along a route for shorter walking distances to/from destinations
- Expanded service to new areas versus improved service/schedules and reliability in the existing service area
- More weekend service versus improved weekday service schedules
- Longer service hours versus more frequent service

Buses running more frequently on fewer streets versus buses running less frequently on more streets.

Overall, RRTA riders favored longer service hours over more frequent bus service and having more bus stops and shorter walk times compared to fewer stops and a faster ride. BARTA riders are also generally in favor of having more bus stops along a route with shorter walk times over fewer bus stops and faster trips. In addition, BARTA riders favored having higher frequency service on fewer streets as opposed to lower frequency service on more streets.

### Trip Characteristics

The survey also asked riders about their typical trip. Overall, the majority of RRTA riders accessed the bus by walking to the stop and, after alighting the bus, most walked from the bus stop to their destination. Over 30 percent of RRTA riders needed to transfer buses at least once during the trip they were surveyed on to make their journey. Close to 65 percent of RRTA trips were for either work or school purposes.

Overall, the majority of BARTA riders also accessed the bus by walking to the stop and, after alighting the bus, walked to their final destination. Close to half of BARTA riders needed to transfer buses at least once during the trip they were surveyed on to make their journey. Like with RRTA riders, over 60 percent of BARTA trips were for either work or school purposes. Other frequent trip purposes include shopping and medical visits.

## Rider Profile

In addition to questions about typical trips and travel preferences, the survey asked some demographic questions. The responses to these questions will help inform Title VI analyses produced by SCTA. Fifty percent of RRTA riders identify as white. About 25 percent of riders identify as Hispanic or Latino and about 20 percent of riders identify as Black or African American. The average age of RRTA riders is 41 years old and 25 percent of riders are between the ages 25 to 34. In addition, Spanish is the second most common language (after English) spoken at home among RRTA riders; a small percentage of riders also speak German or Pennsylvania Dutch at home. Finally, almost 70 percent of riders are employed. Employed riders are more likely to work on a Saturday than a Sunday; about half of employed riders start work before 7:00 a.m. or work after 9:00 p.m. In addition, almost 100 percent of riders use a cell phone and over 80 percent of riders have access to internet on their cell phone.

Close to 50 percent of BARTA riders identify as white, while about 33 percent of riders identify as Hispanic or Latino, and about 20 percent of riders identify as Black or African American. The average age of BARTA riders is 44 years old and about 20 percent of riders are between the ages of 25 to 34. In addition, Spanish is the second most common language (after English) spoken at home among BARTA riders. Finally, about 60 percent of riders are employed. Employed riders are more likely to work on a Saturday than a Sunday; close to 50 percent of employed riders start work before 7:00 a.m. or work after 9:00 p.m. In addition, almost 100 percent of riders use a cell phone and over 80 percent of riders have access to internet on their cell phone.

# Paratransit Survey and Agency Interviews

## PARATRANSIT SURVEY

SCTA conducted a mail survey of riders of both paratransit systems the agency oversees, BARTA Special Services and Red Rose Access. The survey asked questions about rider satisfaction with the services offered by BARTA and RRTA as well as basic demographic information for Title VI.

SCTA ran the survey from March 23, 2023 through May 12, 2023. In sum, SCTA collected 246 completed surveys, 160 from BARTA Special Services and 86 from Red Rose Access. The following provides a high-level overview of results of the survey. A detailed summary of the survey is available in **Appendix D**.

## High-Level Results

### RIDER SATISFACTION

In the survey, rider satisfaction was measured across a series of several metrics. Over 65 percent of Red Rose Access customers are satisfied with the service overall. They are most satisfied with the cleanliness inside the vehicle, the driver courtesy and friendliness, and the driver help boarding and exiting the vehicle. Red Rose Access customers were least satisfied with the time it takes to make their most

frequent trip, the vehicles arriving for pickup within their 30-minute pickup window, and the ease of making a reservation.

Eighty percent of BARTA Special Services customers are satisfied with the service overall. They are most satisfied with driver courtesy and friendliness, the cleanliness inside the vehicle, and the help drivers provide boarding and exiting the vehicle. They are least satisfied with the time it takes to get to their destination and the vehicles arriving within their 30-minute pickup window.

## TRIP CHARACTERISTICS

The survey also asked riders about their typical trip. The majority of Red Rose Access customers use the service to travel to and from medical appointments. Just four percent of Red Rose Access customers have used an Uber/Lyft ride to replace a Red Rose Access trip. Three percent of Red Rose Access customers have used Uber/Lyft as part of a Red Rose Access trip.

Like with Red Rose Access customers, the majority of BARTA Special Services customers are most likely to use the service to travel to and from medical appointments. Seven percent of customers have used Uber/Lyft to replace a BARTA Special Services trip, and five percent of customers have used Uber/Lyft as part of a BARTA Special Services trip.

## RIDER PROFILE

In addition to questions about typical trips, the survey asked some demographic questions. Two-thirds of Red Rose Access customers identify as White; the remaining 33 percent identify as Black or African American or Hispanic or Latino. The average age of Red Rose Access customers is 70 years old and over three-quarters of customers are 75 years or older.

About one half of BARTA Special Services customers identify as White; approximately one-third identify as Hispanic or Latino, and about nine percent identify as Black or African American. The average age of BARTA Special Services customers is 70 years old, and over seventy percent of customers are 60 years or older.

# AGENCY INTERVIEWS

In addition to a survey, SCTA conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of agencies who partner with SCTA to operate BARTA Special Services and Red Rose Access. The goal of these interviews was to better understand the capabilities of these partner agencies and their satisfaction with their partnership with SCTA. In total eight interviews were conducted, four with Lancaster County agencies and four with Berks County agencies. The following presents the results of the interview findings. A detailed summary is presented in **Appendix D**.

## High Level Results

Overall, the agencies interviewed recognize that BARTA Special Services and Red Rose Access are important services that many depend on, and interviewees expressed satisfaction with the administration of and the staff of both Red Rose Access and BARTA Special Services. Interviewees also noted that the application process for both systems does not pose a significant barrier for those who use it, indicating that signing up for specialized transportation services in Lancaster and Berks Counties does not present a major barrier.

While interviewees were overall satisfied with Red Rose Access and BARTA Special Services, they did note some specific areas for improvement. For both services, interviewees indicated there is demand for more ability to create regular schedules, especially when the same customers are required to make regular

trips, such as to dialysis clinics. Further, interviewees working with both services noted a desire for better real-time information, especially regarding delays. Interviewees working with Red Rose Access also noted that outside the City of Lancaster, service often require long wait times and very full vehicles. Similarly, interviewees working with BARTA Special Services indicate issues with on-time performance for clients located outside of Reading.

Beyond on-time performance and real-time data tracking, another key challenge among some interviewees was cost of the service. The cost of service for Red Rose Access and BARTA Special Services varies and not all agencies interviewed reported cost as an issue. However, for some clients, cost is a major barrier to using both Red Rose Access and BARTA Special Services.