

RTCC Meeting Notes

02-16-23

Attendees:

Carey Amthor (MHMR)
Debbie King (Executive Director Meals on Wheels for Falls and Hill counties)
Heather Travers (McLennan County)
Jana Svacina-Waldrop (Waco Transit)
Judge Cindy Vanlandingham (Bosque County)
Judge Scott Felton (McLennan County)
Judge Jay Elliott (Falls County)
Misty Hendon (HOTCOG)
Russell Devorsky (HOTCOG)
Rep Pledger (HOTCOG)
Serena Stevenson (Waco Transit)
Tenay Douglas (HOCTIL)

Call to order 11:05 am.

Proof of posting.

Judge Elliot: Action item: Discuss in-person meetings vs virtual meetings. Personally, I like in-person. We don't want to rule out virtual because occasionally we'll need an expert witness or speaker that can't attend, but in-person needs to be the primary means of meeting. Of course, we can always play it by ear in case of emergency, example if second wave of covid happens then we could do virtual. Another reason for in-person is because the chairman and vice chair have to be in present anyway.

Rep: TxDot allotted money to spend for lunch and in-person meetings but so far it doesn't seem to be working. If we add the option of virtual meetings, then even fewer people will show up. Virtual meetings just like the executive board meetings, the chairperson will have to be in-house to do that part of it. Also we want to get more people here like from Limestone, Freestone, etc.

Russell: Virtual works for bureaucratic and functionary purposes, but when you have a policy board it's good to have that comradery and networking and you can take in the energy in the room and builds teamwork.

Carey: Out of the invites that went out, how many asked for virtual?

Misty: Probably 2.

Rep: The two that requested virtual were probably TxDot employees. That was brought up after the last meeting. We can't give the virtual option for just TxDot.

Carey: My preference is in-person because the people logged in don't usually ask questions or participate. Is it possible to have floating meetings as far as location?

Rep: If we used different locations, how many people would attend? Example, if we had one in Fairfield next month, would you attend?

Judge Elliot: I'll go anywhere.

Carey: I'd go.

Judge Vanlandingham: Central location is best – but regardless of where it's held, everyone should be dedicated enough to attend.

Judge Elliot: I'm in a small area and have a small selection of who I can choose to attend in my place. Having in-person keeps me involved. With county judges and mayors, if someone's not showing up then we need to find someone to go in their place so their city is represented. I don't always know every problem in my county but usually I've had someone contact me and I'm able to contact Rep or whomever to find out the information needed. What's important is that we have participation so that we can make the best recommendation to the executive board.

Rep: Maybe we need to have every other month a floating meeting. So, in April we could move somewhere else.

Russell: There is a convenience to having a central location because we staff here and have records easily accessible here. Willing to try anything to expand participation. Maybe we can find a way for TxDot to zoom in.

Judge Elliot: If you're in Waco you don't have an excuse. We're usually given notice so we can avoid conflict in schedules.

Judge Vanlandingham: One concern is there's usually not just one meeting - there's always meeting because they can't be in two places.

Rep: Is there a specific day that's better to have these meetings on that doesn't conflict with other board meetings?

Russell: We could schedule this to run right after the EBD meeting since everyone would already be here.

Serena: I prefer in-person because it provides a different dynamic. When you're on virtual there's a disconnect and someone could walk into my office and I might miss something

important. We also need to hold people accountable in rules regarding attendance and the expectation is for when they're supposed to be here.

Russell: There's a lot to be said for nonverbal communication and zoom creates lag time and then you have people talk over each other.

Serena: In-person allows you to have discussions in case there's misunderstandings that happen, people misinterpret things and you can easily resolve that. In-person allows us to keep the communication open between all of us.

Judge Elliott: I concur.

Judge Felton: What is the attendance requirement?

Rep: We'll look and get back to you with that. We had KFH come in and condense it for us because we were not making quorum.

Serena: I remember we discussed adjusting bylaws in order to make quorum. If we're not holding people accountable, then we as an organization need to reassess that.

Judge Elliott: If it isn't enforced then it's not a rule.

Russell: This is an example of why it's good to hold meetings in this office because we're able to get up and pull information.

Judge Felton: Sounds like the majority want in-person. If we could put two meetings back-to-back, then it would help.

Russell: COG meets 4th Thursday of every other month.

Judge Elliott: The exception is TxDot in Austin not having to travel up here.

Judge Felton: What about if they're not a voting member then they can do virtual.

Russell: With EBD meetings they decided if you miss 3 consecutive non-excused meetings then you're vacated. Now the chairman can designate what's excused.

Serena: Don't we still have the option of sending a proxy?

Judge Felton: Sometimes the dedication's there but there's a scheduling conflict.

Russell: We recognize when someone has a scheduling conflict versus someone that just doesn't show up.

Serena: I will always send someone in my place if I can't attend.

Russell: We all have different responsibilities and sometimes our other obligations take priority.

Judge Elliot: We'll entertain a motion.

Judge Felton: I back the motion for in-person meetings.

Russell: Do we want to do it every other month after the COG meeting?

Judge Elliott: Yes

Russell: Motion on the floor is that we will have in-person meetings, every other month, after the regularly scheduled COG meeting. We can provide a virtual option for TxDot employees that our not able to come.

Judge Vanlandingham: I second.

Judge Elliott: We've got a motion and a second, everyone in favor say "aye".

Group response: "Aye"

Judge Elliott: Opposed say "nay".

Group response: -

Judge Elliott: Motion carries.

Rep: Our bylaws state voting members with 3 consecutive absences will be contacted by the council chairperson and encouraged to attend the meetings and/or indicate reasons for not being able to attend. HOTCOG transportation staff, in cooperation with the Council Chairperson and others, if necessary, will attempt to determine the reasons for non-attendance in order to arrive at a satisfactory and diplomatic resolution. Attendance records and the dates of each term served will be recorded and maintained.

Russell: From a functional standpoint, what that means is they will miss 75% of all your meetings before they're subject for removal. After they've missed half the meetings, we'll reach out to see if there are some extenuating circumstances.

Judge Elliott: Call motion to vote. Everybody in favor say "aye".

Group response: "Aye"

Judge Elliott: Opposed?

Group response: -

Judge Elliott: Motion carries.

Judge Elliott: Action item 5: discuss or select a new chairperson or vice chairperson. I'm in favor of putting Judge Justin Lewis as chairperson.

Judge Vanlandingham: I second.

Judge Elliott: Is there anybody else that you would like to nominate for the chairperson?

no response

Judge Elliott: Alright, I will call it to vote. All in favor say, "aye".

Group response: "Aye"

Judge Elliott: Opposed?

Group response: -

Judge Elliott: For vice chair?

Judge Vanlandingham: I recommend we re-appoint Judge Elliott for vice chair.

Judge Felton: I second.

Judge Elliott: Alright, I will call it to vote. All in favor say, "aye".

Group response: "Aye"

Judge Elliott: Opposed?

Group response: -

Judge Elliott: Motion carries.

Judge Elliott: Action item 3: Discussion or action for coordinated fare system to use throughout our region.

Rep: Last time we discussed this and Serena wasn't able to attend. Serena, I know you are going through changes at WTS, have you already selected something or do you have any thoughts on it.

Serena: We're planning on taking it and going to council for RFP because we need to move toward a contactless payment option, especially with covid and being able to help mitigate that risk, and it's easy to implement with Rural McLennan County transit district and Waco Transit since we're together. My thoughts are, have you thought about what kind of solution you want? Do you want a software as a service? Do you want a custom system? If you let me know what you're looking at scope wise and need then I can put in alignment with what we're doing when we can go after the RFP. I don't necessarily want to stay with the legacy system we have now because it's expensive to upgrade and there are cloud systems that would be more cost efficient. I just need to know your end goal. As far as fares go, WTS would stay what it is because it's urban, but we can look at McLennan County fares and take a proposal to the board and see if that's something they want to look at and us interlining. We can bring back thoughts on that. We're \$3 and we're \$5 if you go across – we can do cost allocation plan and present it to the McLennan County Board and we can present it here. Or we can have a joint presentation on the benefits aligning those.

Judge Felton: I agree on the approach we should find where it works with both entities, that way when we go to council, we're on the same page.

Russell: Judge did you mean all 3 of us, WTS, McLennan Rural, and RTD? Or just McLennan Rural and RTD? All have the same system?

Serena: The system I'm anticipating is you can have different fare structures, you would just use the same ecard, but I'm thinking more with fare because changing WTS fares it's a whole different process. The rural transit fares. The rural transit would connect to cog service and from there the media option would still be utilized on WTS. Then from there let's say if it's \$3 to come to Waco – a \$3 fare also equates to an all-day pass on the urban system however that's a different funding source between our two rural systems, so I'd have to work out logistically how we'll align the rurals and then the urban is just a different animal.

Russell: I agree. If we have the same medium, the customers that go from one system to another and they're accustomed to what it is, it makes more uniform and user friendly.

Serena: We'll look at validators the same type of validator on all the services. We'd also want to look at our purchase services individuals so that instead of me doing a purchase order to help pay for cost we have for them, they would in turn get that cash associated with the services that's provided to our purchases service contractor as well so it's a direct deposit into their accounts instead of all this back-end transfers we're doing because it's based off how your fare is coded to the appropriate entity. I do think it's an option we can entertain.

Jana: Banking institutes matter too.

Serena: City of Waco would require us to bank thru Wells Fargo so we ran into a hiccup because there was one option we were pursuing was with Chase because they were the only one this software provider would use and we ran into that obstacle. Stuff on that end you have to work through and then once we send it to legal, when we get ready to put the RFP together, we would do some demos. I'd like to visit with Ms. King and her thoughts about the scope because if we're working together then everybody should have a say in it. Up front we work on the logistics for the rural side and then we can move into working with WTS. I do plan on putting out an RFP in the next couple of months so having your thoughts on scope would be beneficial. Fare structures and those things, we can work that out after the fact. It's just understanding what we want from the equipment, who's going to own the data, who would house the data. We pay a direct cost to the City of Waco and they manage a lot of our software services so I would probably continue to request they manage it and from there we work out the logistics. A lot of entities do that.

Rep: Absolutely. In the DFW area they talked about a seamless system to get from Dallas all the way to the OK boarder and how to pay it. I don't see why we couldn't do it in our 5-county region. They could come into Waco, we could drop them off at the bus station or they could get on at a bus stop and they have their pass and they can pay for it and roll with it.

Serena: And the backend sorts out the logistics and you'll get yours based on how it's set up and coded and it's not all this manual processing and transferring and determining did this person pay you or pay me?

Judge Elliott: I agree. In the big scheme it's less about us and more about making it as easy as possible for the customer. If it costs us a little more in the begging to make it better for our riders, I'd rather have this with one card across the board. I think the majority of people are coming into Waco.

Serena: This also shows we have collaborations and shows we have a partnership that's bigger than "who's in charge".

Rep: We can set up a meeting between WTS, Debra King, and us to figure out what we want and go from there.

Judge Elliott: Action item #4: Discuss/and or actions: putting together committees that are listed in the bylaws for RTCC.

- Rep: There's a planning, budget, and guidelines committee. Do we want to keep doing this as a whole or do we want to set up committees and run the committees to come back with information at different times.
- Judge Elliott: If something pops up that needs research, could we not set up a committee for who could participate and they could come back and give us something?
- Serena: Kind of like our project - like we're discussing contactless fare and coordinated fare system. The experts on that committee would be myself, Rep, Ms. King and if anybody else felt like they wanted to bring some added value they'd be more than welcome. Rep's group could send an email saying we'd be meeting for discussions and ask if there are any questions you want covered and then at the next meeting, the reporter will come back and say what we came up with and these are the performance indicators and from there we make a vote vs. making set committees that have subject matter experts on it and then you're pulling from the team anyway. If we're talking about health and mental health and things we need to do to address that then I'm going to say I'm not the subject matter expert. So you wouldn't put me on that committee today just to have a standing group, I don't think it's beneficial.
- Russell: As the issue arises the chairman has the option to appoint the committee as needed and as the issue arises, we can address it that way instead of just having standing committees that don't meet.
- Carey: We need to make sure we have a consistent group coming here before we make committees anyway. I like the idea of a committee as things come up. Does that mean we have to change the bylaws?
- Russell: We like to be proactive not reactionary. At the same time when we see the issues come forward, the people that are driving it every day, they see it coming before it becomes a problem. It gives them the ability to fix it or work on it. Or does it have to come before the full board for consideration.
- Rep: Carey, to answer your question it says: appointed by the chairperson and voted on as-needed so we're good there.
- Judge Elliott: So I think between meetings, if something pops up, the chairman can say, "hey I need you three" and shoot an email out saying we're putting together this committee and does anybody else want to be on it. Then we determine what we need them to do because it will come back to us.
- Russell: Just like we're doing with the fare system. They'll get together and work on it and then bring it back to us before the board will vote.

Judge Elliott: Action item 6: Are there any unmet needs of our riders? What I would find interesting is from Waco Transit vs. McLennan Transit vs. HOTCOG Transit, is there anything common? Sometimes urban has just issues that rural areas don't have. Maybe some rural transit they're able to do something but when they come to Waco that's a rule that can't do it. For me that's the potential hiccup. When you hit rider expectation, the consistency or unmet needs.

Serena: I'm just going to say that from a passenger standpoint, when there is an issue, Rep and I work very closely to make sure the issue is addressed immediately. Sometimes he may get an issue that really isn't in his service and it may be in mine. We investigate it and turn our findings into Rep so he can move forward. He and I communicate on process and policy so we know what we do and why we do it. Example, we may not allow our vehicle to back up, but we're making a general policy that's reflective of most service deliveries; however, there's an exception if you're in a rural area and it's wide open and the driveway won't allow for you to have a pull thru so those are some things that in theory it would work across the board but then say one person rode my service one day and then maybe they go with Rep's and now they're saying we're doing different things. Then Rep and I get together and discuss why we do it a certain way and figure it out and make sure we communicate clearly with that passenger. I think if something does arise, we work very well together. As with Ms. King, if there's an issue with our passengers, we try to determine 'ok this person doesn't do well in this vehicle', we just massage it and ultimately provide the transportation.

As an organization we're all still in need of operators because of the shortage so I think that would be for Ms. King or maybe Rep, do we go after additional funding, but if we go after additional funding with the state we have the expectation that we spend it, but if we don't have additional drivers to take on additional passengers we can't. We need to be able to execute the service because the state doesn't want us to return money. So there is a revenue generator there but there's a performance expectation as well. So as services I think we do really well but it's just a component as far as operating shortages we just have to continue to look at each one of you to try and see if you can send people our way. Work to get our wages up.

Judge Elliott: If the State of Texas streams that to a rider vs. a rider/driver. I can't get the bus drivers more money because extra money can't be used in that so I have to play the budget.

Russell: Many of those funds are so specialized, it's not all just general revenue, it's special purposes. And you mentioned something I think the board needs to know is, is our general policy that we don't back buses up. That's when you have a problem is when you're backing up. Rep had one that was a dialysis patient who rides all the time, live in a multi-family unit. The mom lived in the front and the bus would pull up and pick up the mom then they traded houses and the mom was in the backside of the property with a lot of trees and you couldn't back the bus up in there and the daughter would not bring her mom down to the front house so that she could get on the bus so it created an issue. So we had to send out specialized vehicles to pick up the lady for dialysis and the

daughter said to just back under the tree that she didn't care and we told her we didn't want to tear up our buses and I don't want to tear up your trees.

Serena: Yes they say that today, but then later they take that back.

Russell: Then she said well just turn around in the yard and that's good until you get stuck. Or they'll say well you ran over my sewer pipe. So sometimes the passengers have expectations that are not necessarily realistic but we try to work with them. So when we send out a vehicle for just one person it's not efficient and we lose money.

Serena: We have to look at it for the situation and assess it and align our policies and help the passenger understand why we do it. If it's something that's going to cause damage to our vehicle, I wouldn't expect us to do it and I wouldn't expect Rep to do it.

Russell: With Covid, we run a lot of dialysis and these dialysis facilities will tell their patients to come in sick. For us we don't want a sick passenger getting on the bus because then the driver gets sick and then the other passengers get sick. We don't have enough drivers. If you take a driver out you're affecting multiple people.

Serena: Did you install the shields in your buses?

Rep: Most already came with the back shield behind the driver.

Serena: We have a side shield beside the driver that boxes them in.

Rep: No, we didn't do a side shield, we used masks. We looked at the filter system but there was an expense of replacing the filter every month.

Russell: When you're running several buses, that cost adds up.

Judge Elliott: I have not heard any complaints from constituents. Rep will usually contact me if there's an issue with a rider and I will contact them and explain why we can't do certain things. Sometimes they're willing to accept an answer from me because of my title. I have had people complain because they want the blue buses to drive them around McLennan County and I've explained that it's a different service. There's also an education part of it. They also want the bus they're familiar with.

Heather: When we're talking about unmet needs, most of the conversation has revolved around complaints we received. Are there any other tools that we're collecting data to determine if there are folks that have needs that are not being met. The reason I ask is because it's possible there are people that have tried to utilize it and did not feel like their needs were met and didn't complain but never used it again. So then they're not accessing the services they might need because they're simply not complaining.

Serena: We do passenger surveys. We're required to call so many passengers on both sides of our service. It's not the person that books the trip, generally we have the passengers that are used to talking with the dispatcher when they're called in to book the trip. What we try to do is have the person that actually schedules the trip reach back out throughout the month. While each one of our dispatchers are required to do like 10 surveys per week so from there they get the feedback and turn those in. We use that to analyze if somebody says something, or there's an issue that needs to be elevated. Sometimes we just reach back out to tell them we appreciate them for using our service and to please let them know if they don't feel comfortable talking with a dispatcher or a scheduler that they can always reach out to the director of operations or myself to open up that communication. I'm able to tell Judge Felton that we are reaching out and we are receiving that feedback. Sometimes it's not necessarily an issue with how we're performing it's their understanding of the rules and what we can and can't do. Some people want you to carry groceries into their home and you might have one driver that's nice and will do it and another driver that follows the rule that you don't cross the threshold. So it's not about who did right or wrong, it's that this person can extend that courtesy; however, it's not a requirement because if something happens we have a whole different issue. People can make a reasonable modification request and from there we try to have something done and so we do it for that individual, it's not a policy across the board.

Rep: We do an annual survey that's just a couple of questions the drivers hand out. Most of the times it's people asking, "why can't I have it this way?" – they're looking for their own taxi to get them what they want done, by themselves. They don't like to ride with more people on the bus. We have to get as many people on the bus that we can.

Heather: We have a strong resistance for people wanting to use transportation. Judge was able to allow us to use a portion of our budget to purchase bus passes and we can't give them away. There's such a resistance to utilizing the public system. I even had staff each go out and ride the bus thinking if we can understand the system then we're able to communicate with the clients better and equip them with what to expect, but that hasn't worked. We still have bus passes from two fiscal years ago that we've not been able to utilize. A lot of those were rural transit. We shared our passes with some other programs that were getting some utilizers. People just don't want to be on the bus with a lot of other people and when you're thinking about mental illness, that makes sense. There's the anxiety. It's complicated and hard to understand. If you get off at the wrong place or get on at the wrong place, sometimes they're doing the best they can to get from A to B so when you throw a whole lot of options in there it's complicated. That's the feedback that we're getting.

Russell: But your employees, when they rode the bus, they didn't really have a problem?

Heather: They felt it was complicated and confusing. They used maps and we have maps in our offices, we have a TV in our lobby that plays stuff to help explain the process. A couple of our staff were stuck on a bus in the middle of summer that didn't have an air conditioner. They understand when they're talking to clients, they still encourage them though.

Russell: I have to go to DC next month and they have one of the best systems and it's still kind of confusing. So, I understand where people get confused especially if they're not used to using it.

Heather: We do encourage them to just try it. Just ride around and get a feel for it.

Serena: We can do travel training, even if it's for one person. We could assign them an ambassador to take them around to some of the locations they may frequent to build that level of trust. We have drivers that have the same route and they get used to seeing certain faces at a certain time. Then as they become more comfortable, that drivers looking for that individual, like with dialysis you typically have that same driver picking up the same people so once they start having a set schedule and they start to get used to riding with the same people. Consistency does help. We also provide a QR code in our vehicles so if someone has questions or wants to report something anonymously, they can use the code or send in a request saying that they need help. I would encourage them to scan that code to provide us with another means of feedback. That info comes to me so it's not like that they're trying to tell on someone.

Carey: When I had staff we would do travel training with clients on the bus. Where would they call to get that?

Serena: They would just call Waco Transit and tell them they're interested in travel training. We can map out what services you need to determine what training is needed. If it's rural we could coordinate with Rep and walk them through how to get on and who to call so it's not so intimidating when it actually happens. Then they realize even though we have different names on our vehicles, that we're still unified in our approach to providing that service. Maybe we come up with something that connects us in a sense to where that identifies to show we are one. We might be separate but we are one in our common goal and maybe that will help the passenger to understand.

Russell: This meeting, how we're having this discussion, is an example to show why it's important to have in-person meetings because we're just having an open sidebar on something that you would miss on a zoom call.

Serena: We could have a symbol that we all use to show we're the same service.

Rep: It's just like that "Safe Place" sign you see in different places where there's just a sticker.

Serena: Just to show we're unified and you're safe regardless of which service you're on instead of just being so segregated in what we do. We may have separate pots of money but ultimately, we're all here trying to do the same thing.

Russell: Our customers don't care about our pots of money.

Rep: The flip side to being confusing, and Judge Vanlandingham was telling me there was a gentleman that didn't want to use the service because it was charity and he didn't want charity. They're trying to show him it's not charity, it's a service for everyone to use and ride.

Heather: There's a stigma associated with it that we think doesn't exist anymore, but it does.

Russell: Up north mass transit is used. One area has it free where you can just get on and ride because they're trying to get more cars off the road and they have more congestion. They have different issues than what we have.

Heather: That's why I thought having the staff ride would help with some of that stigma too.

Jana: We do travel training to organizations so the staff has more of an understanding on what we do, so that is an option too.

Serena: Maybe if you are having some events or activities maybe we could come and bring vehicles so they can see what the vehicle is like. Maybe seeing it and talking to an operator and being able to ask questions will build a level of trust and confidence.

Heather: That's a great idea. There's not representation there at the community events we participate in. We're trying to connect them to all these resources but we're not giving them the tool they need to get there.

Judge Elliott: They know the service they want and don't realize there's 5 other tools out there but they can't see it because it's not exactly what they want.

Russell: People just don't know what they don't know. It's not that the services aren't there, it's just they're not aware of it.

Serena: Dialysis people know about it because the centers are pushing that.

Russell: Dialysis cents should be buying adds on our buses because they get paid for trips and we get nothing and they're very demanding. That's one of the problems, we work with them but they know they've got 4 different customers that come there but they don't work to bring them in together, instead they schedule them for 5 different days during the week. They don't care that it's inconvenient for you.

Serena: That's because the law allows for you to pick your provider just like it allows someone who's on medicaid or medicaid service to pick their provider so I realize from a transportation standpoint that we love to have it. Just reach out to us, I'm sure Rep would extend that same courtesy. We could get a vehicle there to some of these events. Bring out applications so they can get certified.

Rep: To clarify my area is Falls, Limestone, Freestone, Bosque, Hill. We do bring them into McLennan County and we can tell them this is how you get out and this is how you get in.

Serena: And maybe we can get some type of presentation together so we can show them the connection and show them what we have between us. That might be an opportunity to you to present to the consumers some of your services so they can see it. Maybe we could do a better job at putting some materials together to show that you guys exist.

Judge Elliott: We can adjourn but still have some of those sidebars while we have lunch. I can tell you I've learned a bunch. When we think about the money and in-person meeting, we could potentially change someone's life that doesn't have transportation.

Russell: When you educate one person, that person can take that knowledge to others and let them know that it worked.

Heather: Best form of advertisement is word of mouth.

Judge Elliott: I put forth a motion to adjourn for lunch.

Serena: I'll make a motion to adjourn at 12:18pm.

Carey: I second.

Judge Elliott: Alright, all in favor say, "aye".

Group response: "Aye"

Judge Elliott: Opposed?

Group response: -

Judge Elliott: Meeting adjourned.