

MCAT Initiates Handy Bus Pilot Program

The Public Works/Transit Division recently commissioned a new paratransit vehicle prototype for Handy Bus service delivery operations. Handy Bus is the door-to-door service Manatee County Area Transit (MCAT) provides for people with disabilities that cannot utilize the regular fixed route bus system, due to their disabilities.

Handy Bus vehicles are typically the smaller light-duty/mini-buses designed and built on Ford and Freightliner Chassis, with a wheelchair lift on the side of the bus, and seating for both ambulatory and wheelchair passengers. In June 2018, a new high-top van with a wheelchair lift in the rear of the vehicle is being introduced into Handy Bus service delivery operations, and evaluated in a pilot program lasting one year.

The prototype high-top van has securement locations for three wheelchair passengers, and in the event that these securement locations are not needed, seating is available for eight ambulatory passengers. The vehicle floor plan also accommodates a combination of ambulatory and wheelchair passengers, providing much-needed flexibility in service delivery operations.

Here are some the advantages to using the high-top, accessible van for Handy Bus operations:

- Significant unit cost savings on the purchase price when compared to mini-buses.
- Enhanced maneuverability in confined spaces as the high-top van is shorter in length and narrower in width, compared to mini-buses. This is especially important when operators are navigating through mobile home parks and congested medical centers.
- The lower roof-height provides accessibility to potentially pick-up clients waiting under low clearance overhangs. This benefits customers when their pick-up occurs during pop-up showers and when shade is important on very hot, summer days.
- The engine operates at a lower decibel level, which provides a quieter ride.
- The potential for lower incidence of non-scheduled maintenance and repairs than the larger mini-buses.

- The ability to purchase body panels, parts, and driver controls through local dealerships, which reduces the prolonged down-time compared to specialty parts, which require shipping.
- Interior styling with a more inviting feel, coupled with a very comfortable, smooth ride. This benefits passengers during travel both on local, residential streets and during travel on higher speed cross-county thoroughfares.
- Exterior look and styling with a crisp, fresh appearance.

The Public Works Transit and Fleet Divisions are constantly exploring methods to improve customer service, enhance service delivery operations, and provide savings both in capital and operating costs. Handy Bus passengers benefit from an innovation that enhances maneuverability and passenger comfort, while providing



Handy Bus staff with added flexibility when developing daily route schedules. The high-top van potentially provides that rare opportunity to create a winning proposition benefitting the passenger, Manatee County Government, and taxpayers.

Later this year, Manatee County Government will also deploy mobile ticketing to benefit Handy Bus passengers, as the mobile ticketing program is proving to be very popular with passengers in just the first two months of deployment on the fixed route bus system. Providing the mobile ticketing fare option for paratransit users, as a complement to the current Handy Bus pre-paid fare program, is a unique opportunity in the public transit industry, and expanding the mobile ticketing pilot program to support paratransit passengers is a very important service enhancement.

