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CATA to keep on demand service rolling

By Ethan Forman | Staff Writer



Gloucester resident Jay Smiledge and his service dog Annie sit inside the CATA On Demand bus at Addison Gilbert Hospital on Tuesday morning. KIRK R.WILLIAMSON

For Gloucester resident Jay Smiledge and his service dog, Annie, the ability to hail a CATA On Demand shuttle bus through an app has proven to be a lifeline.

The local on-demand ride-hailing service has also made a believer out of Annie, a hound-Labrador mix from Omaha who is trained to alert Smiledge to seizures caused by hypoglycemia, a dog he said he got in concert with the Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston.

“Annie is the co-pilot on most of these rides,” Smiledge said. “She likes to be right up behind the yellow line. She likes to look out the window and she keeps an eye on everything that is going on, so she loves riding the bus.”

The year-long pilot of the on-demand service has proven so successful that the Cape Ann Transportation Authority and its sponsors plan to continue the service through mid-2023 and perhaps beyond to help Gloucester celebrate its 400th anniversary.

The service is billed as a cost-effective way to get around the city with a rate of \$2 for a one-way trip. Passengers of sponsor employers ride at no cost.

Right now, the service zone does not encompass the city, but takes in both the Gloucester and West Gloucester MBTA Commuter Rail stations and the Blackburn and Cape Ann industrial parks.

Proponents of the service marked its one-year anniversary Tuesday, including Felicia Webb, the CATA administrator, Jason Andree, vice president for Addison Gilbert and Beverly hospitals, Mike DiLascio, who sits on the Gloucester Economic Development and Industrial Corporation board of directors, Carl Gustin, a former EDIC chairman, and Ken Riehl, CEO of the Greater Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce.

The group stood outside Addison Gilbert's back entrance in a chilly wind adjacent to an on-demand shuttle to describe the service and why it's important to continue with this "last-mile" transportation option.

DiLascio said the idea for the service came from a survey of employers in the industrial parks eager to be able to get their workers to and from the train stations. He said the program is keen to bring on new sponsor organizations or employers.

"The main reason why this was put in place was to address this issue called the last mile," Riehl said.

In its first year, Webb said the service provided more than 15,000 trips to 500 unique individuals who commute to work, travel to medical appointments or who run errands.

"To provide ease of access to health care is crucial, but also it's important to our employees with recruiting," Andree said.

"CATA On Demand is obviously filling a transportation gap that exists in our community and it would be remiss to end this service," Webb said, thanking the EDIC, the chamber, the city, Applied Materials and Gorton's for their support.

Webb said financial support from various entities was just over \$20,000 for the past year. Webb said this money served as a local match for a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation which paid for 80% of the service's operating costs. This year, Webb said a goal to raise \$40,000 has been set for the program.

"When I first found out about this I was thrilled," said Smiledge, who lives near Stop & Shop on Thatcher Road, "because I had been riding the taxi for so long and the fixed route service and having the service animal and especially with health needs, this service allows me the flexibility to ride the bus on my terms and my schedule."

Smiledge said the downloadable app is user-friendly, allowing him to hail a ride by pressing two buttons, one for the pick-up and one for the drop-off. The app has a feature which remembers your trips, he said.

"CATA as an organization, they are probably some of the most friendly and warm-hearted people that I've met," said Smiledge. "They always greet me by name. They know my dog. They know my routine. They have always been there to make sure that my needs are taken care of when I'm on the bus."

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