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**To:** Regional Transportation Commission <[info@scrrtc.org](mailto:info@scrrtc.org)>  
**Subject:** Micro Transit

Hi Sarah,

I would like to provide the following Associated Press article to the Interagency Technical Advisory Committee members. Thank you.

John Hibble, Co-Executive Director  
Aptos Chamber of Commerce

GETTINGAROUND

### **What if public transit was like Uber? A small city ended bus service to find out**

By Jeff McMurray, The Associated Press

When a small city abruptly parked all its buses to launch a publicly subsidized van service offering \$1.50 trips anywhere in town, only one of its bus drivers — a big-city transplant — went along for the ride.

Milton Barnes used to oversee packed subway stations in Washington, D.C., a far cry from the sparsely filled buses he drove after moving to Wilson, North Carolina, to care for his elderly parents. Although transit ridership plummeted almost everywhere due to the pandemic, it has been surging in Wilson since its September 2020 switch from a fixed-route system to an on-demand one powered by a smartphone app.

“All day long I’m picking up people and dropping them off,” Barnes, 59, the only driver to work under both systems, said while driving his van on a typically busy morning. “When you’ve got door-to-door, corner-to-corner service, it’s going to be more popular.”

Long wait times made the bus route almost unusable for David Bunn, even when his car broke down and he couldn’t afford to replace it. Instead, Bunn, who has two broken discs in his back, would take a 5-mile (8-kilometer) roundtrip walk to pick up groceries. Then he spotted one of the public vans and dialed the phone number posted in a rear window.

“I don’t have to walk everywhere I want to go now,” said Bunn, 64. “They come pick me up, they’re respectful, and they’re very professional. It’s a great asset to Wilson and a great service to me.”

The city of less than 50,000 people is frequently cited as a model for how less-populated areas can capitalize on transit in the same way as bustling metropolises.

Wilson landed federal and state infrastructure grants to support the shared, public rides residents summon — usually within 15 minutes — through a service operating like Uber and Lyft, but at a fraction of the cost to riders. Trips are now \$2.50, a dollar more than they were at launch, and Bunn quips, “you can’t drive a Pinto for that.”

Other communities in North Carolina and elsewhere took notice and have tapped into available public funding to start programs of their own, heightening Wilson’s competition for continuing grant money.

These smaller-scale, tech-based solutions to public transportation problems, known broadly as microtransit, have emerged as a great equalizer in the battle for infrastructure dollars that has traditionally pit the bus, train and subway needs of urban areas against the road construction projects sought by rural communities.

“We don’t view transit as something only for big cities,” U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told the Associated Press. “We want people to benefit wherever they live, including in less-dense, rural areas. The point of transit is not to have a bus. The point of transit is getting people where they need to be.”

Ryan Brumfield, director of the North Carolina’s Department of Transportation integrated mobility division, said Wilson’s transition to microtransit came largely by necessity. Officials seeking to lower Wilson’s sluggish unemployment rate first had to address the fact that in some pockets of the 23-square-mile (59-square-kilometer) city, as many as 3 in 10 residents lacked access to a car to get to work.

“That combination of a lot of people needing a service and it happens to be fairly dense makes on-demand a perfect fit,” Brumfield said.

More than half the rides are for residents using the vans to “maintain or get employment,” said Rodger Lentz, Wilson’s assistant city manager who pushed for the switch.

But need and convenience weren’t the only reasons behind the city’s 300% spike in public transit ridership. Image was a factor, too.

“In small, southern towns, the perception of public transportation is that it’s for the low-income,” said Gronna Jones, Wilson’s transportation manager. “There’s a stigma attached to riding the bus. Going to microtransit and nontraditional vehicles removed that stigma.”