

RIDE | On-Demand Microtransit in Wilson

Wilson and NCDOT launched the RIDE on-demand microtransit service, operated by Via, on September 1, 2020. RIDE replaced Wilson’s fixed route bus service that was often inefficient, partly due to Wilson’s large geographic area and the widely varying transportation needs of Wilson residents.

The Service Model

- *On-Demand* – RIDE is truly on-demand, meaning riders are typically picked up within 15 minutes of booking at the location of their request or a virtual bus stop a short walk away. For comparison, RIDE differs from traditional “dial-a-ride” service which typically requires 24-48 hour advanced booking.
- *Use of Phone Application* – RIDE users can schedule and pay for trips, check the location of their vehicle in real-time, evaluate driver performance, and provide feedback through a smartphone application. Unbanked riders can purchase ride cards with cash at various locations around Wilson. Riders without a smartphone can use a land line to call a dispatch center to request a trip.
- *Turn-Key Service* – RIDE is turn-key, meaning Via operates the service, ensures compliance with state and federal standards, and supplies the vehicles, equipment, software, phone support, and drivers. Vehicles are rented from a rental car company. Drivers are independent contractors. Drivers sign up for time slots on a first come first serve basis. Via also offers a software-as-a-service model in which they provide only their software and phone application for transit agencies to integrate on their existing vehicles.
- *Funding* – RIDE is funded through the same combination of federal, state and local funding Wilson previously used for their fixed-route service.

Performance

- *Ridership is Up* – RIDE quickly surpassed expectations after launch. Ridership has consistently exceeded the pre-pandemic levels of Wilson’s fixed-route service. In recent weeks, RIDE has provided approximately 2,700 rides per week, compared to less than 1,400 per week on Wilson’s fixed route system. This increase in ridership indicates an underlying demand for transit that was not previously being served.
- *Wait Times are Down* – Average wait time for RIDE has been around 15 minutes, fluctuating some from week to week depending on demand and number of vehicles available for service.
- *Cost Per Trip is Down* – The average cost to Wilson to provide one trip on RIDE has been about \$11. For comparison, the average dial-a-ride trip in North Carolina costs \$22 to provide. RIDE is more efficient, with built-in schedule optimization to reduce driver down time and time driving without passengers.

Broader Application in North Carolina

- *Growing Interest* – Dial-a-ride service exists in all 100 counties. Given Wilson’s success, there is considerable interest across the state in a transition to on-demand microtransit.
- *Statewide Contract* – NCDOT is developing a statewide contract that will make advanced transit technology vendors available to transit agencies throughout the state. NCDOT is using federal COVID-19 relief dollars to kick-start a transition to on-demand service for many transit agencies.
- *Increased Transit Demand Anticipated* – Widespread use of on-demand microtransit will result in a significant increase in ridership throughout the state. This increase in demand could eventually require an increase in supply of services, which would come at a higher cost to local governments and NCDOT.

Overview

On September 1, 2020, the City of Wilson and Via launched RIDE – a new microtransit service replacing the City’s fixed-route bus and on-demand transit system. On August 27, 2020, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) awarded an Accelerating Innovative Mobility (AIM) grant to the City of Wilson that has expanded the microtransit service area and increased operating hours.



Photo by Via

Users of RIDE can schedule and pay for trips, check the location of their vehicle in real-time, evaluate driver performance, and provide feedback about the service through a smartphone application. Unbanked riders can purchase prepaid vouchers and riders without a smartphone can schedule rides online or by phone. This innovative service is one of the first of its kind in North Carolina and is reducing wait times, providing greater service reliability, improving the overall rider experience, and increasing access to opportunities and services for residents.

Background about Wilson

Wilson is located east of Raleigh, North Carolina with approximately 49,000 residents. While relatively small in population, Wilson leads in innovation. In 2008, they became one of the first places in the country to build their own fiber optic network, bringing affordable internet to low-income residents, while also enhancing educational opportunities and attracting new businesses to the community.



“Our existing bus system is outdated and inconvenient for most citizens. We believe RIDE will not only provide a better service for current transit riders, it creates a new, convenient and modern transportation option anyone can access.”

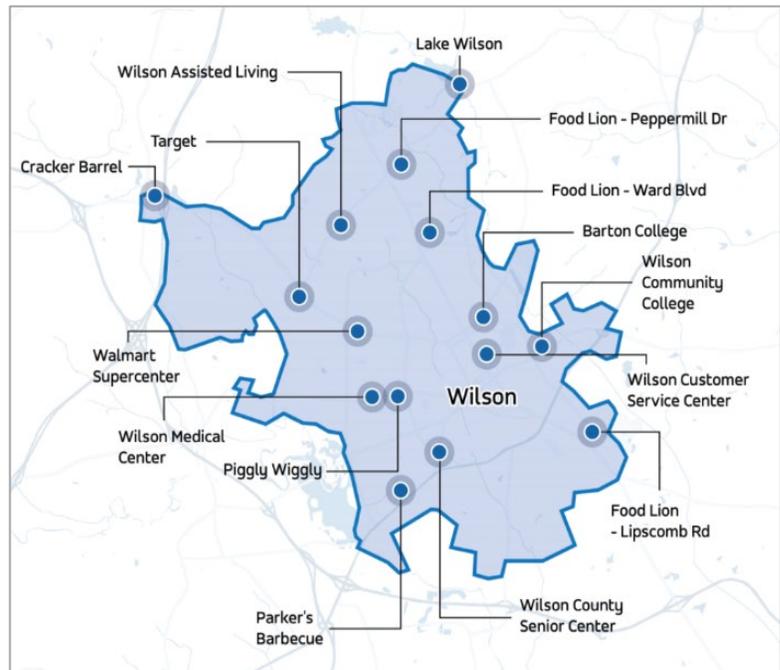
— Grant Goings, City Manager
[Local News Article about RIDE](#)

Newfound equity and access in the area of broadband connectivity highlighted the remaining needs in another — public transportation. Like other rural and small-urban areas, public transportation in Wilson has faced many challenges, including lack of first and last mile infrastructure, low density of destinations and population across a broad geographic area, and difficulty providing efficient service due to budget constraints. Wilson’s bus system dates to the 1960s when most industry was downtown, but Wilson’s economic center has since decentralized. Prior to launching RIDE, the former fixed-route system served only 40% of Wilson’s municipal area leaving residents without a transit option for accessing jobs and services further from the city center.

Service Details

Wilson has partnered with Via to fundamentally rethink how public transit can foster economic mobility for its residents. RIDE is more convenient and responsive than the fixed-route system it replaced as riders can request a trip at any time during hours of operation. A RIDE vehicle meets the rider at a nearby virtual bus stop and transports them to their destination, picking up additional riders along the way. Users can request rides on demand through a smartphone application, dedicated web portal, or by phone. As a cashless system, RIDE accepts credit or debit cards. In order to serve the sizable number of residents without a smartphone or credit card, RIDE also accepts RIDE credit that can be purchased in cash at the Customer Service Center and Inspections Window.

Additional service details include:



Developed by Via

- Trips cost \$1.50 each and riders may bring an extra person for \$1.00. Children under 8 ride free and Wilson Transit Senior Citizen and Disabled ID card holders are eligible for discounted pricing.
- Drivers are independent contractors of Via and must meet stringent safety and training requirements to be eligible to drive.
- Vehicles used for RIDE are rented through a local rental car company and branded with the RIDE service logo. Driver schedules and access to vehicles is facilitated by the Via smartphone application.
- RIDE operates Monday through Friday from 5:30 AM until 7 PM and Saturday from 7 AM until 6 PM anywhere within the service zone outlined in the map shown above.
- Expanded hours of operation during weekdays are funded through the FTA AIM Grant.

Project Planning and Development

Wilson, Via, and NCDOT worked closely to develop the project and implementation plan. A priority focus area prior to launch was ensuring the service meets eligibility requirements for FTA's 5311 funding program which comprises a significant portion of Wilson's transit budget. Key funding eligibility considerations include:

- Meeting the definition of public transportation by offering shared rides to the public.
- Satisfying core federal requirements, particularly related to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Title VI, drug and alcohol testing, data governance and reporting, and driver safety training.
- Ensuring all residents have equal access to the new service, particularly those with disabilities and individuals who are unbanked or do not have a smartphone.
- Preparing the public for the new service by starting with a "trial" period, including free service for a limited time, and by providing ample opportunity for pre-launch and ongoing public feedback.

Equity and Accessibility

Wilson and NCDOT are committed to providing an on-demand microtransit service that is not only effective and efficient, but also equitable and accessible. As part of the FTA AIM Grant, Wilson and NCDOT prepared an Equity and Accessibility Plan (EAP) that identifies potential challenges and solutions for providing equitable, equivalent, and accessible service to transportation-challenged groups:

- The **Via smartphone application** interfaces with smartphones' native accessibility features such as text-to-voice and screen readers.
- **Wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAV)** are included in the Via fleet for providing accessible transportation to riders with disabilities.
- A **Call Center** is available to assist riders with booking and paying for trips that may not have access to the smartphone application and/or web portal.
- **RIDE credit** can be purchased with cash at the Customer Service Center and Inspections Window for riders without credit or debit cards.
- **Pre-paid debit cards** available at a range of shops and grocery stores can be purchased in cash and used to pay for RIDE trips.

Project Performance

RIDE's performance to date has exceeded expectations, **providing approximately 6 times more riders** per week than Wilson's previous fixed-route service. As a result, the RIDE fleet has been increased to keep up with demand. In addition, RIDE has expanded access and enabled essential activities with 52% of riders using the service primarily for commuting and 38% primarily for essential errands such as grocery and healthcare. In-depth interviews conducted in July 2021 demonstrate the positive impact RIDE is having in the community:

RIDE is a great thing for Wilson. More convenient because you can get to more destinations than the city bus all around town. I love it.

When I have to be somewhere I like to get where I'm going. On the city bus you had to transfer, get on another bus. You had to leave the house an hour 2 in advance just to make it somewhere on time.

My mother stays in an area where the city bus only runs once a day, very early in the morning. I would need to walk a long way to get to her house before, but now I can go visit anytime.

Lessons Learned

As one of the first microtransit projects in North Carolina, RIDE has provided an opportunity to learn invaluable lessons that other agencies are now considering when implementing microtransit:

- **Consider the increased ridership demand** that results from introducing an on-demand service that is more convenient and efficient than previous transit service.
- **Establish level of service metrics** such as the estimated time of arrival (ETA) in the contract with a microtransit service provider.
- Design a **service that is equitable and accessible** to diverse rider populations by providing multiple ways to book and pay for trips such as operating a call center and accepting pre-paid debit cards.
- **Include an option for pre-booking trips** when designing the service if important to the transit system.
- **Identify a local maintenance provider** to minimize vehicle downtime.

Microtransit Innovation across North Carolina

Interest in microtransit is growing. Transit systems across North Carolina are exploring, planning, and implementing microtransit in a variety of operating models and rural-urban contexts. Some systems are adding microtransit to complement existing transit service while others are improving regional connectivity with long-distance microtransit service. Microtransit programs can be operated directly by the transit system, utilizing their vehicle fleets and drivers, or operated by contracted microtransit providers. Regardless of the operating model and context, microtransit programs are designed to improve customer service, reduce wait times, and increase access to jobs, healthcare, education, and services.

The map below identifies current microtransit programs by status, which is subject to change as additional projects are initiated and implemented (last updated in August 2021).

