

One-Year Review

May 2008-May 2009

In May 2008, we launched A2Chelsea Express to meet an emerging travel pattern. Various studies have recommended the introduction of longer-distance commuter transit routes. A2Chelsea Express marks the first time we've tailored service to customers who aren't in range of our regular network. As the service entails some other characteristics new to us, we've chosen to operate it on a contracted basis during the initial phase. We are able to offer this route on a demonstration basis thanks to a two-year CMAQ grant. One year in, we're taking a moment to review a few notable milestones.

Ridership

In the first three full months of operation, ridership stabilized quickly. This suggests that commuters who showed an early interest in this type of service hopped on right away. By August 2008, the route's small core of customers represented about 18 percent of available capacity. In September 2008, ridership shot up dramatically thanks to a fare partnership with the University of Michigan. With the partnership, many initial customers enjoyed a lower fare, and a whole new wave of customers began to use the service.

Eight months later, ridership has stabilized again – this time at a much higher level than before the fare partnership. The ridership is subject to an even turnover rate – customers leave the route at the same approximate rate as new customers come. We average about three inquires per month from potential customers.

Marketing

As a new type of route, A2Chelsea Express debuted with a strong marketing and education campaign. We developed a specific brand identity for the product, which helped to distinguish it from other long-established services. Print ads appeared in community newspapers, coffeehouse bulletins and in the envelopes of utility bills sent to Chelsea residents. To disseminate more specific route information, we featured the new route on our regular website, created a customized A2Express website, linked information to the U-M commuting resources website, added schedules to the Ride Guide and included information in getDowntown materials.

We have explored various cross-promotional opportunities with



Ridership

10,864 and counting...

Month	Rides
May 2008	386
June 2008	772
July 2008	712
August 2008	815
September 2008	1102
October 2008	1364
November 2008	1049
December 2008	1091
January 2009	1214
February 2009	1171
March 2009	1188

Performance

A near-perfect record...

Direction	OnTime
Eastbound	98.5%
Westbound	99.6%

Arctic Coliseum, our park-and-ride partner in Chelsea. While these efforts have not increased ridership substantially, they have helped to raise the service's profile in the Chelsea community. In cooperation with Indian Trails, our operations contractor, we have placed an A2Chelsea Express banner ad on the back of the regularly assigned bus.

We've also encouraged existing customers to spread the word: through the Rider-Get-A-Rider program, launched in October 2008, we offer current customers a one-time 50 percent fare discount upon referral of a new customer.

Partnerships

Strong partnerships have enabled the debut of A2Chelsea Express. Two important partners are the parking lot owner and the operations contractor. Over the course of the demo, we have maintained frequent contact with both parties. No major challenges have arisen that our partners haven't been able to address.

Beyond these two, we have developed a key partnership with University of Michigan Parking & Transportation Services. The

department has traditionally subsidized half the cost for on-campus monthly parking permits and vanpools. In September 2008, the department extended the cost-share offer to cover monthly and half-monthly fares for A2Chelsea Express. As part of its regular communications with its customers, the department has made thousands more commuters aware of the service and the cost-share arrangement which it provides. Currently, we are pursuing similar arrangements with several Downtown employers.

From our end, we've expanded flexibility by making A2Chelsea Express customers eligible for the Guaranteed Ride Home program. GRH provides important peace-of-mind as commuters make the switch to transit.

Operational

We've learned some valuable lessons in coordinating this new service. While originally envisioned as a premium commuter product, we have seen usage trends more typical of standard peak-hour transit. For instance, customers appreciate that two trips are available in each peak period: they switch trips frequently based on their day-to-day needs. While in conflict with the original idea of trip-specific subscriptions, we did not want to limit flexibility. In adjusting to this customer demand, we've moved away from the idea of guaranteed capacity.

At Arctic Coliseum, we've paid closer attention to snow removal routines. We found that the original bus stop location didn't make sense in relation to where snow was plowed and where customers were parking; we have alleviated the issue by boarding customers closer to their cars.

We have yet to arrive at an optimal solution for fare payment. Initially, we visited the bus en route to sell pass cards directly to customers. While this offered maximum convenience for customers, it required of our staff excessive time commitment and hard-to-control revenue. In January 2009, we initiated a manifest system. Under this arrangement, customers pay the next month's fare by a specified deadline, and their names then appear on a "good list" prepared by AATA and enforced by the bus operator. This system, too, has proven problematic. Collecting fares by the deadline, managing and updating the manifest, and verifying customer eligibility have become overly complicated tasks susceptible to error and "creative interpretation". We're currently taking inventory of our resources and capabilities to come up with a better system. In the meantime, we have introduced other, more cut-and-dry fare payment options, such as a Ten-Ride Ticket and, of course, exact cash.

Customer Satisfaction

Customers have responded positively to the high quality of service on A2Chelsea Express. The comfort of the buses, the friendliness of the bus operators, and the perception of customization have contributed to strong loyalty and glowing reviews. Some customers have enthusiastically recommended the service to their neighbors and co-workers – either with or without the Rider-Get-A-Rider incentive – while other customers have wished to preserve the close-knit, club-like atmosphere aboard the bus.

We have interacted with customers throughout the year. We're striking a balance between responsive customer service and reminding our customers how to adjust to routine changes. For instance, our operations contractor reassigned bus operators in April. Several customers wrote us letters expressing their preference for one specific operator. We responded to these concerns, informing customers that minor changes are inherent to any transit service. Safe, punctual, efficient service is our goal – other elements may come and go as long as core product quality does not suffer. As we search for ways to improve and expand the service, our customers will continue to be a great resource.

The Future

The same CMAQ grant enables us to open a second demo route. We're gearing up to create A2Canton Express as a companion to the existing Chelsea service. With its high concentration of University of Michigan employees, Canton has emerged as an ideal location for this type of service. As we plan, we'll include the positive features of Chelsea and avoid the unsuccessful ones. We are working to overcome some of the challenges associated with operating beyond Washtenaw County.

As for Chelsea, it will enjoy a new splash of attention as Canton hits the market. Once the two routes are up and running, we'll market them together as part of a mini-network of longer-distance commuter routes. We imagine that a network which reaches further in all directions will better capture the attention of each individual corridor.

Planning and marketing aside, we're evaluating pricing and operational options to control costs. Is the current fare structure realistic? Would it cost less to operate the service in-house? How might we continue the service past the grant phase? Over the next year, we'll shift the focus to these questions as we continue to tweak the front-line product attributes. 