



# South Coast Area Transit

## Better Information Yields Results for Paratransit Service

*"Employees have all the information they need, when they need it. As a result, they are able to think clearly and make proactive decisions. They have found confidence in their ability to deliver the service they state they will deliver to our passengers."*

**Margaret Heath, Paratransit Manager,  
South Coast Area Transit**



### BACKGROUND

South Coast Area Transit, founded in 1973, provides bus service for approximately 3.5 million riders annually in Western Ventura County, CA within the cities of Ojai, Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Ventura and the surrounding unincorporated areas. South Coast Area Transit's ADA complement for passengers whose disabilities prevent them from successfully negotiating the fixed route system is called ACCESS. Recognizing the similarities in mobility problems the disabled and senior populations face, the agency expanded this service in 1999 to include seniors 65 years and older. There were

108,000 boardings on the ACCESS curb-to-curb paratransit service in 2004.

### CHALLENGES

While ACCESS was able to absorb ridership increases of 20 percent or more annually for five straight years, staff felt that the scheduling system in place was not supporting their requirements. Revising the base schedules to accommodate more subscriptions was a labor intensive process, as the base ridership grew from an average of 55 daily boardings in September 1999 to 354 in January 2004. Staff were limited to reviewing a few routes at a time instead of

all of the routes. In many instances the result was less efficient scheduling options. ACCESS takes same-day reservations subject to space availability. The legacy system made it difficult for schedulers and dispatchers to quickly determine whether a trip could be scheduled that day because they could not easily see "the big picture." This sometimes meant that clients were kept waiting for an answer for as long as 15 minutes while schedulers determined whether they could accommodate the request. Sometimes employees were subjected to outbursts from frustrated passengers who couldn't understand why it took so long to learn that there was no available space for them.

Margaret Heath, Paratransit Manager, describes another challenge for management: "Our scheduling system did not make it easy for a manager to investigate customer service problems or to track who had made changes to a route. We were spending too much time doing detective work instead of addressing the issue with the client or employee."

In January 2005, in a move to protect the provision of core ADA service, eligibility requirements were tightened. As a result, agency trips were eliminated. Agency trips accounted for a substantial share of ACCESS's total trips and were typically productive group trips. ACCESS faced an immediate challenge of maintaining productivity while scheduling more single-passenger trips.

### SNAPSHOT

**Type of service:** ADA curb-to-curb paratransit open to seniors 65 and older

**Number of vehicles:** 24

**Number of registered users:** 3,322

**Trapeze products used:** Trapeze PASS

	January 2004	January 2005
Vehicle miles	54,276	38,450
Passenger boardings	8,279	6,007
Av. weekday boardings	354	200
Passenger per VRH	2.50	2.50
Cost per boarding	\$15.97	\$17.02
Total cost	\$132,215.60	\$102,239.10
Net savings \$	—	\$29,976.49
Net savings%	—	23%

**GOALS**

ACCESS had a number of specific goals. First, the agency sought to maintain a rate of 2.5 passenger trips per vehicle revenue hour. To offset the loss of the agency group trips, they would need to create more efficient schedules. Second, they wanted to improve customer service by making it easier for dispatchers to handle same day bookings, requests for early pick up and other last-minute changes. A third objective was to find a solution that would enable managers and staff to see "the big picture" when needed. Finally, in response to customer service issues that would arise, ACCESS needed to improve the system for tracking changes to trips. It was difficult to determine what changes had been made to a specific booking and therefore difficult to definitively know where protocols might have broken down.

**SOLUTION**

In February, 2004 ACCESS upgraded its scheduling and dispatch system to Trapeze-PASS. Trapeze-PASS is an advanced scheduling and dispatching application developed to support demand response transit services. PASS delivers a comprehensive solution for client registration, trip booking, real-time scheduling, and dispatching.

**RESULTS**

A comparison of data for January 2004 and January 2005 shows a startling improvement in productivity. Systemwide in January 2004, 54,276 miles were put on ACCESS vehicles compared with 38,450 miles in January 2005 - a 30 percent decrease in fleet mileage. As Ms. Heath, explains, "Even though we discontinued the highly productive agency group trips, we were able to efficiently absorb the loss of volume. Our passengers per revenue hour did not dip below the required minimum of 2.5, and we saw a reduction in vehicle

miles. This speaks to the investment we made in transitioning to the PASS software. The agency confirms that Trapeze enables them to schedule more efficiently. The streamlined interface enables reservationists to locate client information and take bookings in seconds. The system also returns scheduling solutions more quickly than the legacy system. Dispatchers can typically determine within seconds whether or not they can schedule a last-minute trip. More importantly, they can inform passengers of available options within a few minutes.

Trapeze increased the ease with which SouthCoast AreaTransit was able to respond in the event of a natural disaster or an emergency. "We were faced with an emergency during a recent landslide when part of our service area was cut off", Ms. Heath said. "We were able to quickly reschedule trips and mitigate the damage to the rest of the system. This allowed us to focus time and energy on passengers within the impacted area and determine what we could do for them. For many of our passengers, ACCESS provides their only regular, outside contact. We were able to determine who would be adversely affected for that day and subsequent days and contact them within a few hours of the event.

Managers at ACCESS appreciate the fact that when researching customer service issues, they can easily track who has made changes to schedules and why the changes were made. These "fingerprints" cut down on time-consuming investigations and guess work, and they have proven instrumental in helping managers determine which employees require additional training.

South Coast Area Transit places a very high value on customer service. Since implementing the PASS system complaints have dropped from a high of four complaints per thousand boardings while using the legacy system to less than one.

Ms. Heath sums up the changes for staff

this way: "At this time last year there was a lot of tension in the dispatch office as we all tried to provide the best possible service. Now, the tension is replaced by new-found confidence in their ability to perform their jobs. Employees have all the information they need, when they need it. As a result, they are able to think clearly and make proactive decisions. They have found confidence in their ability to deliver the service they state they will deliver to our passengers."

**BOTTOM LINE**

Although the cost of service per boarding increased as a result of the elimination of agency group trips, the overall costs of providing the service decreased 23 percent while service quality to the passenger improved.

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