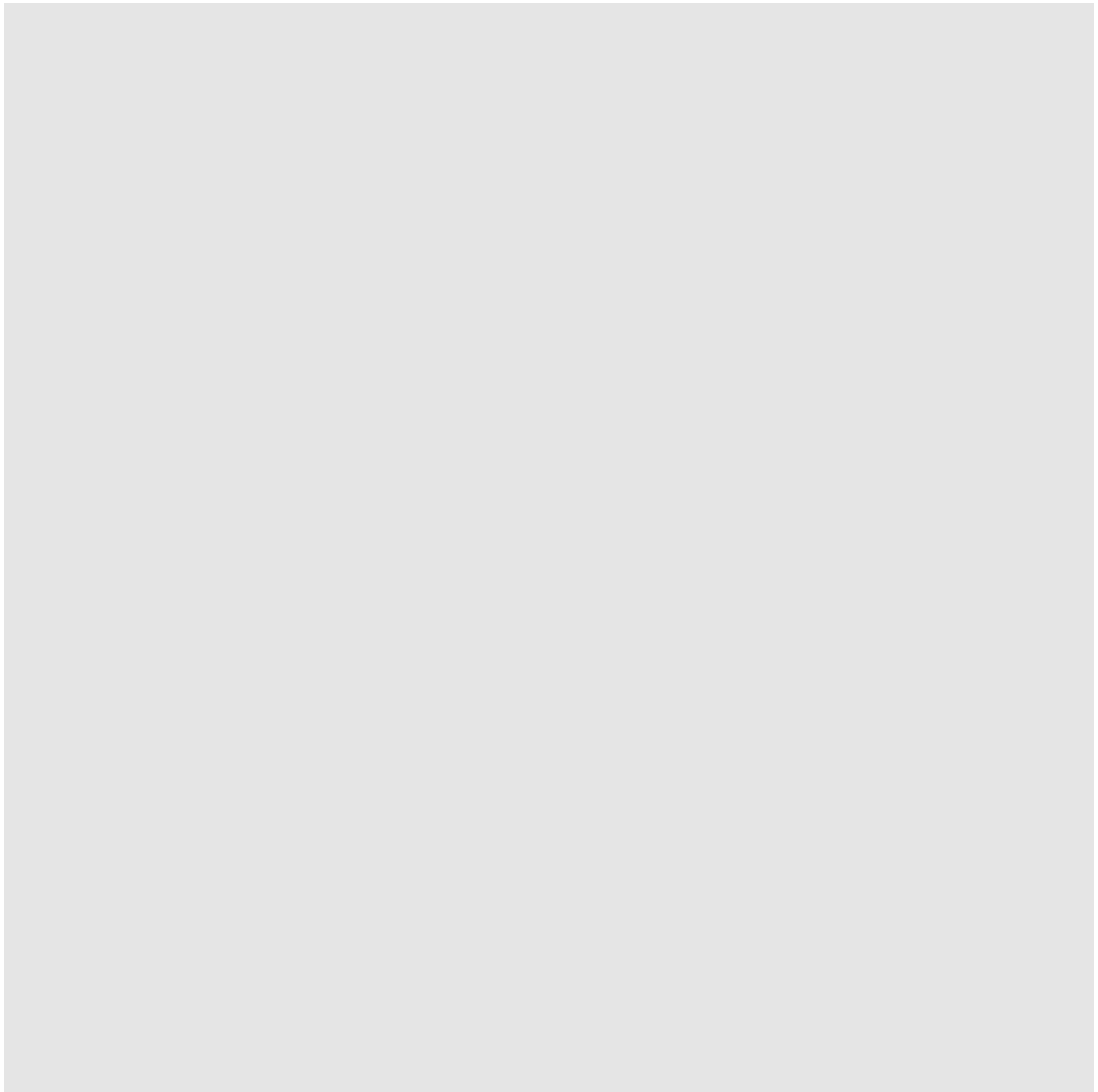


http://www.richmond.com/news/richmond-public-transit-partners-with-local-tech-company-to-put/article_0e483ee5-d6bd-5368-bea3-4b605cae9163.html

Richmond public transit partners with local tech company to put elderly, disabled riders on Uber and Lyft

By BILL LUKITSCH Richmond Times-Dispatch Jul 18, 2017



Donlon



Matt Donlon shows a page from his start-up company's app, Uzurv, which assists customers who order Uber rides.

P. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

As some state and local governments across the country have shunned mobile-based transportation services Uber and Lyft, Richmond's transportation officials have decided to partner up.

The GRTC Transit System on Tuesday announced a pilot program with a local ride-hailing transportation company that's meant to expand options for elderly and disabled riders. The new program — dubbed CARE On-Demand — comes with a one-year contract with UZURV, a Richmond-based technology company that works as a third-party to schedule advance rides through mobile transportation networks.

The move was approved Tuesday morning during a meeting of GRTC's board of directors.

GRTC in April cut ties with its previous paratransit provider seven months before its contract expired in the wake of complaints caused by what a GRTC spokeswoman described as an “unacceptable” lack of consistency, including late pickups and failure to show up for rides. First Transit Inc., based in Cincinnati, took over the service afterward and is expected to continue through at least the end of November.

“We know this partnership with GRTC Transit System will help us both find solutions to make this pilot paratransit service work here in RVA and set the precedent for other transit agencies across the country,” Matt Donlon, UZURV’s founder and CEO, said in a statement. “UZURV knows the need for an on-demand travel reservation system.”

The changes are only available for patrons of the city’s CARE service provided through the city’s public transit system. The program is a federally-mandated arm of GRTC in compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, and users are required to go through a national vetting process to apply for the service.

The contract with UZURV begins Aug. 1.

The city’s new public-private partnership is similar to what other large metro areas in the nation have done to reduce costs of maintaining costly paratransit programs that comply with federal law. Ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft have been adopted into the public transportation infrastructure of cities across the nation where expansion is sought.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office in 2012 conducted a national survey that found the average cost of a single trip amounted to \$29.30. The report pointed to a growing need for the services paired with rising costs to provide them.

The city’s current paratransit system offers door-to-door service in a carpool-style system. Elderly and disabled users can schedule a ride one week in advance to get to and from destinations in Richmond and Henrico County.

Carrie Pace, a spokeswoman with GRTC, said the option would provide added flexibility to riders through a 30-day advance booking and a direct route that serves one customer at a time. The new service is meant to streamline the process so riders spend less time going from place to place.

Pace said the need for paratransit service in the Richmond area is growing, with an additional 90 eligible riders per month. As the use of the program increases, Pace said GRTC needs to “be creative about other solutions to keep up with the demand and also meet the varying needs of the customers.”

The city’s public transportation system estimates the new program would see approximately 250 trips per day in the pilot year. The CARE program does roughly 1,100 to 1,300 trips per day and maintains about 80 buses, Pace said.

The service is funded through localities and receives subsidies from state and federal sources. In 2016, the CARE and C-VAN services were paid for with \$3.4 million from Henrico and \$2.9 million from Richmond. Customer fares accounted for a little more than \$950,000.

The contract with UZURV costs about \$975,000 for the duration of the one-year test-run. Pace said the cost comparison between the current operations and the use of a pilot program are about the same.

If the new service works well, Pace said GRTC could look to further expand its use of ride-hailing and reduce its current fleet of vans.

“It’s possible; we just don’t know until we get into the program and see how the riders start using it,” she said.

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