

**Gridlock**

# Metro to launch ‘Abilities-Ride’ paratransit service this month, but Uber, Lyft won’t be giving the rides

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By **Faiz Siddiqui** September 5, 2017

Two cab companies will take on a share of MetroAccess trips in suburban Maryland beginning Sept. 18, giving paratransit customers the option to hail a same-day ride in the service’s most popular jurisdiction, Metro said Tuesday.

The transit agency is launching its long-awaited Abilities-Ride program in Montgomery and Prince George’s counties later this month, the agency said in a news release. Metro was said to be considering app-based ride-hailing services such as Uber or Lyft for the contract, but it was unknown if the companies submitted bids or were ultimately eligible for the service.

The program, expected to be a relief valve for the troubled paratransit program, is intended to cut costs for MetroAccess, Metro’s most expensive and fastest-growing service per customer. The transit agency has said it could save up to \$6 million annually by shifting rides to taxi or ride-booking services.

“The Abilities-Ride program is a win-win for Metro and our MetroAccess customers in Maryland, who will soon have the ability to choose a taxi trip, rather than MetroAccess, at a discounted rate without having to make an advance reservation,” Metro General Manager Paul J. Wiedefeld said in a statement. “The Abilities-Ride program gives these customers these important benefits while reducing cost for Metro.”

The service will initially be limited to trips that begin and end within the MetroAccess service area in Maryland, according to Metro. Two-thirds of MetroAccess customers live in Maryland.

Trips will be booked by calling the cab company—Regency Taxi and Silver Cab— or booking through their websites or smartphone apps, Metro said. A reservation cannot be made through the traditional MetroAccess portal.

Metro says the first year of the contract is valued at up to \$3.1 million combined, with \$2.1 million going to Regency Taxi and \$1 million being awarded to Silver Cab.

Metro has previously said that between 150,000 and 250,000 trips would be taken during the first year of Abilities-Ride. The transit agency will pay up to \$15 per trip to the contractor, a significant reduction in cost compared to the roughly \$44 cost of a MetroAccess trip. The service is optional for eligible Metro customers, who would pay \$5 for a pickup, and cover any costs beyond \$20.

“The program vendors are able to provide more flexible and less costly service because they are not required to carry the infrastructure required by paratransit providers,” Metro officials said in a board report on Abilities-Ride. “Metro aims to leverage their flexibility and low-cost option for the benefit of addressing the travel needs of MetroAccess customers.”

Uber and Lyft did not immediately respond to questions about whether they submitted bids for the contract or were ultimately eligible to provide paratransit service.

In response to a question about whether ride-hailing companies submitted bids, or whether they were eligible, Metro spokesman Dan Stessel said “certain other proposals did not meet the minimum standards of the [request for proposals].”

“Specifically, there were issues around ability to provide accessible vehicles and with requirements for sharing data,” Stessel said.

Civil rights activists sued Uber in June, alleging the company failed to provide customers with wheelchair-accessible vehicles in D.C. and actively informed at least one individual he could not drive for Uber if he used a wheelchair-accessible vehicle.

In its release, Metro said the cab companies will provide wheelchair-accessible vehicles, and accommodate personal care assistants and service animals. Drivers also will be trained to work with customers with disabilities.

Customers will not share rides under the new program and will be limited to four taxi trips per day, the agency said.

The term of the initial contract is one year. Metro says it will evaluate the pilot to determine whether to expand the program to Virginia and the District. The District has a similar program, Transport D.C., that has proven popular since launching as a pilot in October 2014.

Metro said the contract also includes four “option years” so it could last up to five years if the program proves sustainable. Touting Abilities-Ride as “an option” for paratransit customers, the agency said service will otherwise continue as normal for its 43,000 registered MetroAccess users.

 **3 Comments**

Faiz Siddiqui is a reporter with the Post's transportation team. He covers Metro, Uber and Lyft and anything else that catches his interest. 🐦 Follow @faizsays