



2022 Spring Newsletter



“Wait, could it be?! A newsletter from UTRU?! Why, I haven’t seen a newsletter from these guys in some time. Well now I simply must stop everything and read through this bad boy!”

Well, fellow UTRU member or supporter, we certainly do appreciate your enthusiasm!

All kidding aside, we know that UTRU has been quiet over the past few years; like many organizations, COVID made it difficult to work towards the goals of the Union - we simply didn’t consider a once-in-a-century global pandemic that ravaged communities and brought core services (like mass transit) to a screeching halt when creating our plans for membership drives and advocacy for transit riders - our bad.

But it appears that the worst of COVID may be behind us, and recent developments in Utah’s largest transit system, UTA, have reenergized UTRU’s board. The time is right to reemerge and reengage with both you and policymakers in our efforts to make more effective transit systems that truly meet the needs of current and future riders.

In this issue, we provide summaries and outcomes for some of the major bills affecting mass transit to come out of the 2022 legislative session, a breakdown of UTA’s Free Fare February program, alert you to UTA’s August Change Day, and introduce you to our new Executive Director, Curtis Haring.

So, sit back and have a read while ignoring your TPS report for just a little while longer - while you are at it, please consider making a contribution to the Union in order to ensure that we are able to keep UTRU 2.0 thriving - to do so, simply visit the UTRU website at utru.org!

2022 LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP

Transit is always a hot topic during the legislative session and this year was no different. What made 2022 uniquely different was the \$1.5 billion infusion of federal funds into Utah’s transportation system thanks to President Biden’s American Rescue Plan Act. Though the majority of these funds will go towards road construction and repair, lawmakers felt that one-time improvements to transit were also necessary, building off the \$1.23 billion transportation package the Utah Legislature passed in 2021, helping to fund major projects such as double-tracking FrontRunner. Here is a wrap-up of some of the major pieces of legislation that did and did not pass this session.

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H.B. 164 Public Transit Fares - Representative Joel Briscoe (D - Salt Lake City)

Before UTA announced Free Fare February, Representative Joel Briscoe introduced HB 164, Public Transit Fares. The bill would have required that large transit districts (read: UTA) not collect fares on their system. According to legislative fiscal analysts, the proposal would cost local governments between \$40 and \$50 million annually and save approximately \$3 million in reduced overhead costs.



The bill received a committee hearing, but was held and never received a full vote of the House or Senate.

H.B. 322 Public Transit Capital Development Modifications - Representative Kay J. Christofferson (R - Lehi)

In what will be a massive overhaul for UTA, Representative Christofferson proposed that the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), not a transit district itself, manage the construction of a fixed guideway (rail and dedicated bus lanes such as bus rapid transit) projects. Supporters feel that UDOT is better suited to manage such large-scale projects and would be better able to leverage its purchasing power compared to UTA to more quickly make projects such as dual-tracking FrontRunner a reality.

The bill was passed on the second to last day of the session with a near-unanimous vote.

H.B. 404 Large Public Transit District Amendments & H.C.R. 7 Concurrent Resolution Regarding Improving Air Quality Through Enhanced Zero Emission Rail - Representative Melissa Ballard (R - North Salt Lake)

Representative Ballard is wanting to encourage UTA to seriously consider the purchase of zero-emission vehicles going forward with HB 404. It is her hope that, with electric-powered vehicles becoming more and more affordable, UTA will do its part to help clear the air along the Wasatch Front. HCR 7 is a similar piece of legislation though, as a resolution, does not have the force of law behind it. That being said, successfully passed resolutions help set policy for the state going forward and is a way for Ballard to say “we may not be able to make this happen today, but we want to make it happen.”

HB 404 received only a handful of no votes from conservative members of the Senate and only one no vote in the House while HCR 7 was unanimously approved by both chambers.

S.B. 140 Housing and Transit Reinvestment Zone Amendments - Senator Wayne Harper (R - Taylorsville)

In 2021, the Legislature passed laws that encouraged higher-density housing and commercial development around FrontRunner stations. This year, Senator Harper wants to expand the incentives program to also include TRAX stations in Salt Lake County and current and future BRT stations such as those currently in Utah County under construction in Ogden.

SB 140 easily passed both chambers with only three of the 104 lawmakers in both chambers voting against it.

Free Fare February A Huge Hit!

UTA's Free Fare February turned out to be as surprising as it was successful and speaks to the benefits of free public transit to both transit users and non-transit users alike.

Supported by private-sector sponsors, non-profits, individuals, and governments, Free Fare February saw weekday ridership systemwide increase by 17% and weekend ridership increase by a whopping 58%! But, When you dive into the data a bit more, the benefits become even more amazing.

Weekend ridership saw the most drastic increases in transit use in February when compared to January 2022. Weekend TRAX ridership increased by 75% on Saturdays and 36% on Sundays, weekend bus routes (both traditional fixed-route and Paratransit) saw a roughly 40% increase in use, and FrontRunner experienced a whopping 202% increase in Saturday ridership (FrontRunner does not currently run on Sundays). Weekday ridership also saw impressive jumps in users: TRAX and Paratransit ridership was up roughly 14%, fixed bus routes were up 19%, and FrontRunner ridership was up 36% during the week.

But who were these new riders? We suspect there were three main types of people using the system due to free fares: People using the system to access shopping, recreation, and religious services (particularly on the weekend) instead of either taking a car or not going, people who, under normal fare structures, are forced to limit the number of times they access the system due to income restrictions, and individuals who are willing to consider transit (at least occasionally) but feel that the cost is too high for the time it takes to make a trip.

Though the benefits of free transportation are obvious to the users of the service, what about those who, for one reason or another, were unable to take advantage of free service? Well, they too benefited from free public transit along the Wasatch Front.

Look at the jump in FrontRunner ridership on weekdays. On average, 3,000 more people a day used FrontRunner when fares were free - this means that FrontRunner, being specifically designed for inter-city/county trips, created 3,000 trips without a person having to get into a car and drive. 3,000 fewer cars a day creating traffic jams, polluting the air, taking up parking spots, and adding wear and tear to the roads.

But let's not forget what jumps in bus and TRAX ridership means too. The jump of nearly 9,000 more people a day for buses and 4,000 more people a day for TRAX on weekdays alone have a very real impact on communities. These trips largely remain within communities and, the positive impact on traffic aside, also creates vibrancy in communities that may not otherwise exist when a trip is completed only by a car. When people have easier access to shops, restaurants, libraries and museums, and recreation, the overall health and vitality of a community is improved.

Finally, we want to point out the 169 people per day jump in Paratransit ridership. Though this number is small when compared to the overall increases in the system, free fares represented an opportunity for 150 more disabled individuals per day to access resources in the community that they may not otherwise have been able to.

UTRU strongly encourages policymakers to find ways to make systemwide transit free to the public across the entire state and recognizes that this impact would be the largest on the state's largest system. If the beancounters are right on Representative Briscoe's bill to do just that for UTA, it would cost an estimated \$3.3 to \$4.1 million a month to achieve. Though this number may initially seem high, the overall benefit is clear: free transit improves the quality of life for both transit users and the general public.

Spring Meeting Reminder

As a reminder, UTRU holds quarterly meetings in March, June, and September with a special annual meeting in October to elect Directors, receive reports on the activities of the corporation, and determine the direction of the corporation for the coming year.

To king things off, we are going to be a little off schedule. Our next meeting will be held virtually on **Saturday, May 21 from 10-11 AM** and topics will include:

- Welcome back to UTRU!
- Introduction of new Executive Director, Curtis Haring
- Short term and long term visions for UTRU
- Free Fare February Review
- A call for board members
- Member input/open forum



To get the link and have a not-so-subtle reminder to follow us on Facebook, visit facebook.com/groups/utahtransitriders/ or by contacting Curtis Haring at curtis.haring@utru.org. We hope to see you on May 21st!

Meet the New Executive Director - Curtis Haring!

UTRU is pleased to welcome Curtis Haring as the Union's new Executive Director!

Curtis is a Utah native, born in Salt Lake and a current resident of Bountiful. He holds a degree in Political Science from the University of Utah and has a long history of managing non-profits and political campaigns, in addition, he has always been a strong advocate for mass transit when working with policymakers.

As part of his role as Executive Director, Curtis plans to increase membership and funds for the Union in order to increase awareness and influence of the Union. He plans to reenergize members through the creation of special committees and task forces and increase membership through awareness.

Curtis commutes daily from Bountiful to Ogden and uses FrontRunner and the 470 bus route to get to and from work, biking to and from his local FrontRunner station.

To contact Curtis, feel free to email him at curtis.haring@utru.org.

