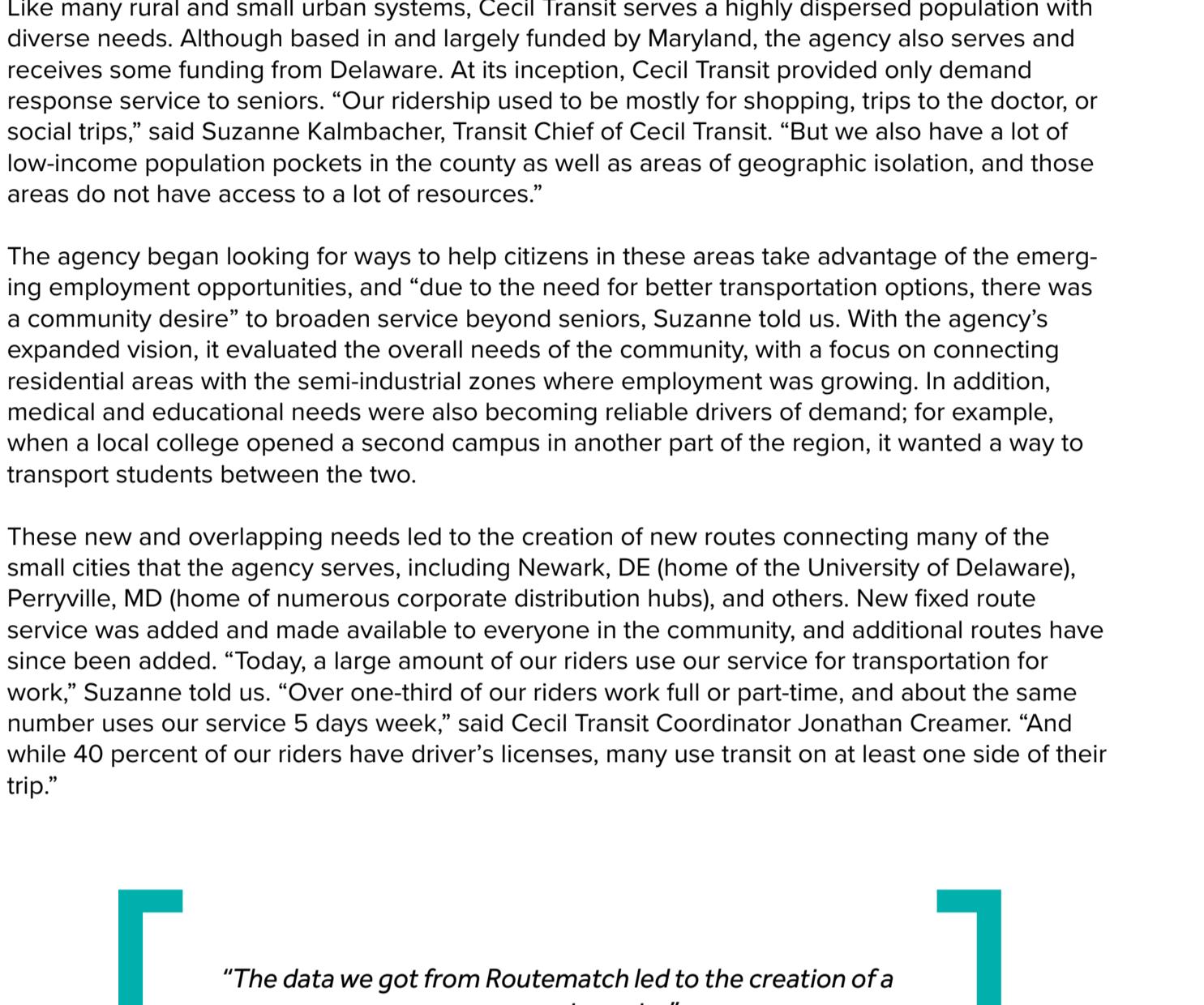


CECIL COUNTY TRANSIT

Transforming Communities and Transit



Cecil County, Maryland lies in the heart of the urban constellation of cities and towns that spans the 225 mile I-95 corridor between Washington DC and New York City. The population of this overall region is enormous, totaling more than 40 million, with Cecil Transit serving a largely rural and exurban region between Baltimore and Philadelphia. But over the last 20 years, the population of Cecil's service area has boomed in sync with the overall Mid-Atlantic region, especially as a hub for distribution facilities serving the nearby urban centers.



A REGION IN TRANSITION

Like many rural and small urban systems, Cecil Transit serves a highly dispersed population with diverse needs. Although based in and largely funded by Maryland, the agency also serves and receives some funding from Delaware. At its inception, Cecil Transit provided only demand response service to seniors. "Our ridership used to be mostly for shopping, trips to the doctor, or social trips," said Suzanne Kalmbacher, Transit Chief of Cecil Transit. "But we also have a lot of low-income population pockets in the county as well as areas of geographic isolation, and those areas do not have access to a lot of resources."

The agency began looking for ways to help citizens in these areas take advantage of the emerging employment opportunities, and "due to the need for better transportation options, there was a community desire" to broaden service beyond seniors, Suzanne told us. With the agency's expanded vision, it evaluated the overall needs of the community, with a focus on connecting residential areas with the semi-industrial zones where employment was growing. In addition, medical and educational needs were also becoming reliable drivers of demand; for example, when a local college opened a second campus in another part of the region, it wanted a way to transport students between the two.

These new and overlapping needs led to the creation of new routes connecting many of the small cities that the agency serves, including Newark, DE (home of the University of Delaware), Perryville, MD (home of numerous corporate distribution hubs), and others. New fixed route service was added and made available to everyone in the community, and additional routes have since been added. "Today, a large amount of our riders use our service for transportation for work," Suzanne told us. "Over one-third of our riders work full or part-time, and about the same number uses our service 5 days week," said Cecil Transit Coordinator Jonathan Creamer. "And while 40 percent of our riders have driver's licenses, many use transit on at least one side of their trip."

"The data we got from Routematch led to the creation of a cross-county route."

*- Suzanne Kalmbacher, Transit Chief
Cecil Transit*

A key to evolving its service and identifying valuable new routes has been Cecil Transit's access to accurate and up-to-date information on rider utilization and transit performance. The agency has relied on Routematch software for scheduling since 2014, and it has been important in how the agency operates its expanding network of services. But perhaps even more important has been Routematch's role in helping the agency determine how service routes should be defined. For this, Suzanne has relied on the software's capabilities in data analysis and reporting.

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DRIVING DECISIONS WITH DATA

Suzanne remembers her early days at the agency, speaking with customers over the phone and scheduling their rides manually. Access to reliable data for route planning was hard to imagine, and initial software implementation focused on automated scheduling and dispatching tools. "Routematch definitely reduced a lot of paper work right off the bat," she told us. "Especially the amount of work it took people to keep track of everything we do."

Routematch software provided access to Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) playback. "Being able to watch our fixed route vehicles move through their stops is great," Jonathan told us. "And having access to GTFS export is also really helpful for monitoring performance and ridership." This showed that many riders were on the bus for its entire 2-hour loop, since the bus only went in one direction. "The data we got from Routematch led to the creation of a cross-county route," Suzanne told us. "We now operate that route both east- and west-bound, and the data from Routematch was very helpful in determining how that route should look."

Suzanne sees other benefits to having visibility to this route-level information, and a principal one is its impact on local decision-makers. "It helps me to communicate the need for certain routes to our Department Director and other County leaders," Suzanne says. "When people ask me why buses aren't full, we can respond with data that shows how much they are full. We can also show how many people are being transported and the growth of ridership over the years."

Other advantages of having ready access to this robust data is in facilitating the agency's reporting responsibilities. "We have data that we are required to report to the NTD, and Routematch's data is really good. We're able to do reporting on so many different levels," Suzanne told us. "I'm a data-driven girl and I think it's wonderful." She also said that the data captured by Routematch enables her to advance transit offerings in her community, as it streamlines the process of applying for innovation grants administered by the FTA. "I really appreciate that Routematch is on the forefront of transit, and pushing innovation forward for our industry."

LOOKING AHEAD

Like virtually all agencies, Cecil Transit is facing new challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis. The agency had experienced its strongest annual growth in 2019 in several years, and had been expecting strong growth in 2020 as well. "Before the crisis hit, ridership had really increased," Suzanne told us. "We had an overall increase in 2019 of 8% over 2018." Suzanne thinks the impact of the current economic disruption in her area will be mixed. "I'm afraid some small mom-and-pops will go out of business," she told us. "But hopefully people will be able to get new jobs with the large businesses in the area."

Suzanne thinks some basic transit functions of her agency will also become more challenging and require new flexibility; to meet social distancing requirements, she converted a fixed route bus line into demand response service. And the agency's use of Routematch's payment service, RMPay, has expanded its following in her community. "RMPay streamlines things a lot for us and we have a core group that has really latched onto it." By eliminating the need for currency transactions, she suspects it will gain additional users.

Suzanne said she expects the overall demands on transit to increase, but she is confident that her agency has the right tools and team to meet the new requirements. "Routematch is a great partner," she said. "They're always willing to roll up their sleeves and get into the weeds with us. Having worked together for many years, I know they really care about my community and are committed to making transit work for everyone here."

Routematch

Email
sales@routematch.com

Address
1230 Peachtree Street NE

Phone
Toll Free: 1 888 840 8791

Suite 2800
Atlanta, GA 30309

Support: 1 866 653 3629