

# PARATRANSIT PROVIDERS Tap Technology to Meet Increasing Demand



The HandiVan, Honolulu's paratransit system, is one of many paratransit operators currently working to strike a delicate balance between service and funding.

## Software programs figured prominently in this year's survey results as operators across the U.S. moved to accommodate sharp upticks in ridership on shrinking budgets.

>BY NICOLE SCHLOSSER, Assistant Editor

**F**OR ITS FIFTH ANNUAL PARATRANSIT SURVEY, METRO POLLED 20 paratransit providers, selected at random. Participants included operators from 15 states across the U.S., and one from Ottawa, Ontario. Respondents answered 10 questions each about ridership, driver-related concerns, challenges and innovations.

### FLEET FACTS

A total of 14,232 vehicles are represented in this year's survey results, with the smallest paratransit fleet totaling 11 vehicles and the largest coming in at 8,175. The mean fleet size is 711, a 55 percent increase over last year's survey, and the median fleet has 161 vehicles.

Only three operators reported having full-sized vehicles (more than 35-feet in length) as a part of their fleet. Mid-sized vehicles represented 51.9 percent, a 29 percent increase from the 2007 survey and small vehicles comprised 32.4 percent, a 44.6 percent decrease from the 2007 survey. Together, mid-sized and small vehicles made up the majority of most fleets, at 51 percent.

A breakdown of bus sizes in all fleets can be found in Figure 1 (see page 32). Taxis accounted for 33.6 percent (up 7.2 percent from last year's data) and vans comprised 14 percent, (down 3.8 percent from last year's data).

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## PURCHASING

Forty-five percent of all respondents reported that they plan to buy new vehicles in 2009, while 40 percent have no plans to make any vehicle purchases in the next fiscal year. (Figure 2) Since funding was cited as a top concern this year, it is not surprising that this number is up 10 percent from last year. The total amount of vehicles on order by surveyed providers is 1,296.

The largest portion of operators with 2009 purchasing plans are looking to buy between one and 10 vehicles (25 percent). Two providers plan to purchase more than 100 vehicles in the upcoming fiscal year. Minibuses and van purchases totaled seven percent. Five percent of operators had not yet determined how many vehicles to purchase in 2009 at polling time.

## RIDERSHIP RISING

Sixteen out of 20 providers surveyed cited a jump in their 2007 ridership numbers, with the average increase at 16.1 percent, while only three providers claimed a downturn, averaging 1.2



The Utah Transit Authority has created an in-house program to streamline its paratransit scheduling process.

percent. (Figure 3) Only one provider had not experienced an increase or decrease in ridership from 2006 to 2007.

The highest ridership increase was reported by Pace Suburban Bus Service, at 36.7 percent.

## INNOVATIONS

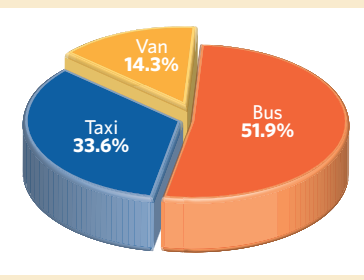
Of all operators surveyed, 60 percent reported implementing some technological innovation to balance the higher demand presented by significantly increased ridership, includ-

ing GPS installation on all vehicles, adding Trapeze scheduling software, adopting cashless fare collection and using interactive voice response technology. Fifteen percent of respondents also added cameras on their buses in 2007.

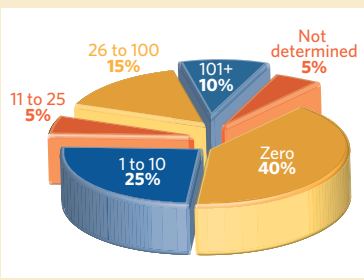
Scheduling software comprised a significant portion of innovations cited, with 30 percent of operators responding that they are either installing or upgrading, to improve efficiency and cost effectiveness.

Mary Rowlands, program coordinator for East Bay (Calif.) Paratransit, reported working on a system upgrade of their Avail Technologies StrataGen ADEPT software. Along with adding a new module to support the MDC/AVL systems, she adds that the upgrade allows for "variances in coding of speeds for city streets, highways and expressways" and also "permits setting

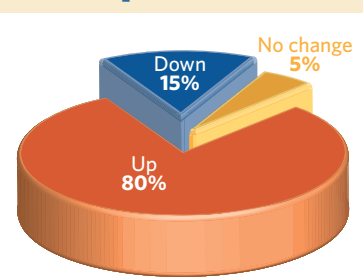
**FIGURE 1**  
Fleet Numbers-Paratransit Vehicle Types



**FIGURE 2**  
2009 Vehicle Purchases



**FIGURE 3**  
Ridership

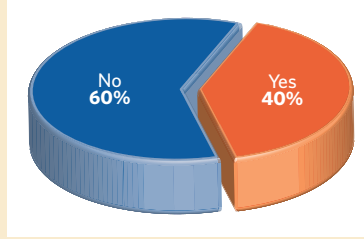


**FIGURE 4**  
Lift Use

**28.4%** The mean percentage of ridership that uses wheelchair lifts. This is a 6.6% increase from the 2007 survey.

**FIGURE 5**  
Integration

Do you integrate paratransit with fixed-route service?



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of exception zones and varying rush hour speeds.”

David Braun, director of business development at First Transit in Cincinnati, noted that, in order to accommodate the growing paratransit market and the rising cost of fuel, the company is continuing its implementation of MDT/AVL units and Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) technology. The provider is also using proprietary scheduling software to provide updates for riders that remind them of scheduled trips, update them on vehicle status or allow the opportunity to cancel the trip before the vehicle is sent. A fuel and emission reduction program has also been added to improve service efficiency and cut costs.

Cherryl Beveridge, RGM Special Services at Utah Transit Authority, reported that the operator is creating an in-house computer program that allows a supervisor to assess the path of

travel from the rider’s home, determine the bus stops and barriers, and update that information into the system. This streamlines the process when using the Trapeze scheduling software system to assist with organizing individual trips.

### CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

When asked about top career concerns, paratransit operators’ highest response by far was recruiting and retention, at 60 percent, only down slightly from last year’s 70 percent figure.

The second-most concern of surveyed operators was customer service,



MV Transportation runs RTC Access, a Reno, Nev. paratransit service, and reported a 22 percent overall ridership increase in 2007.

at 25 percent. Most providers citing this concern were taking steps to improve safety by installing mobile data terminals in vans, as in the case of Ottawa-based Para Transpo; adding Automatic Vehicle Locator (AVL) systems, as New Mexico-based ABQ Ride is doing; and adding DriveCam units to enhance driver safety and rider comfort, like First Transit.

Other concerns included driver absenteeism, not having enough vehicles to accommodate riders, drivers taking unauthorized breaks and training. Each of these weighing in at 5 percent. Providers were primarily facing funding challenges in 2007, according to 55 percent of respondents. Following that was the challenge of increasing demand for service, at 30 percent, and productivity coming in at 10 percent.

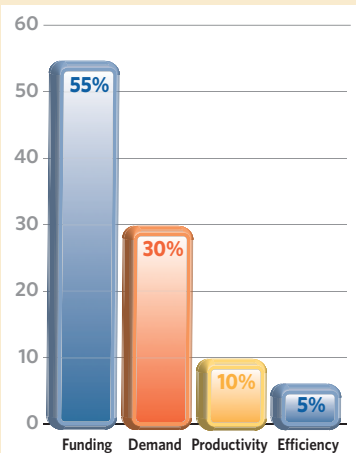
Nikki Frenney, VP, communications and government relations at MV Transportation Inc., noted the challenge of “maintaining a high level of productivity with changes in requested levels of service” and that the provider is responding to the increase in demand by implementing cashless fare collection, IVR technology, Web-based reservations, and automated passenger callbacks and text messaging.

In response to the combination of funding concerns and a six percent ridership increase last year, Henry Jadach of Milford, Conn.-based Milford Transit reports that the operator is “re-lamping the entire facility with energy-efficient lights,” and is working with third-party payers and transportation brokers to supplement income and subsidize public transit functions. □

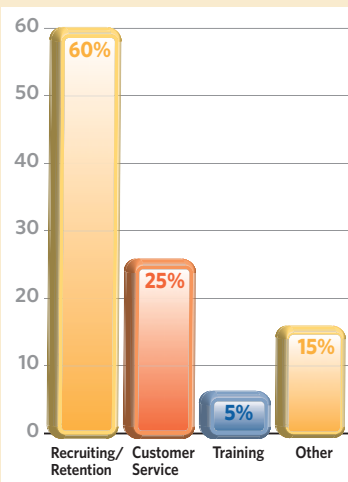
**FIGURE 6**  
Wheelchair Accessibility

**79.8%** Percentage of all paratransit vehicles that are wheelchair accessible. This is a 22.3% increase from the 2007 survey.

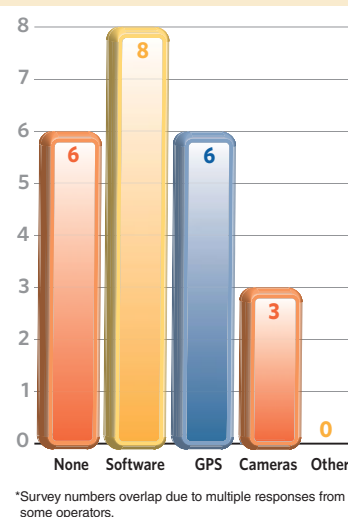
**FIGURE 7**  
What is your biggest challenge?



**FIGURE 8**  
What is your top concern?



**FIGURE 9**  
Technology Upgrades



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