



## **DOWNTOWNER FREE RIDE SERVICE**

### **Overview**

After five years of planning, on October 20, 2016 the Tampa Downtown Partnership launched an innovative micro-transit service to complement the existing downtown mobility options within the 760-acre Special Service District. Made possible through the generous support from both the public and private sector, this mobile app-based, on-demand free ride service, Downtowner, was quickly adopted by Downtown workers, residents, visitors and students. Within the first month of being launched, nearly 13,000 riders were served and over 7,840 miles were covered using the Downtowner app. Our 2016 Biennial Quality of Life Survey was released only one month later and results showed residents quickly adopted the vehicle into their weekly routine, over 20% of being used more than once a week, and reported a high level of satisfaction at 95-96 percent. By its first anniversary, Downtowner announced a ridership of more than 180,500 while eliminating 164 tons of CO2 emissions by using fully electric vehicles in Tampa's Downtown. Almost one and a half years in, the service carries over 500 passengers per day and has become a reliable service many Downtown workers and residents count on to get across the urban core without getting into their cars.

### **The Back Story**

Circulating visitors and residents around dense downtown cores has typically been solved by fixed-route transit. This solution, however, has never been well-adopted in Tampa's car-centric community. The Tampa Downtown Partnership and stakeholders agreed that in order to address our challenge, we needed to think outside of traditional solutions and offer a nimble, flexible system that was on-demand and point-to-point to meet the needs of the population it serves. Due to burdensome regulations governing for-hire vehicles at the time of concept development, the market wouldn't allow a purely private sector solution. Our transit agency, which is the only top-20 metro region to spend less than \$213 million annually, could not justify the cost for a downtown circulator and our region does not have rail beyond our 2-mile streetcar line. The historic TECO Line Streetcar doesn't penetrate the central business district, has limited hours and frequency, and is considered "transportainment" rather than a reliable transit option. Parking rates haven't risen in Downtown since 20004 and spots are relatively cheap and available, deterring the general population from seeking other forms of transportation.

## From a Wish to Reality

With the support of our members, Board, and Executive Committee, the Tampa Downtown Partnership decided to take complete control of the project. We were able to raise a combination of federal, state and city funds through a series of grant applications, totaling over \$1.8 million. Those public funds were eventually matched by the private sector after many meetings and presentations. The final funding came from our own budget. We approached all downtown hotels and commercial office towers asking each for a small contribution. In total, we've secured private funds from about 20 different sources. Overall, the total amount secured for two years was \$2.045 million. Once the money was secured, we issued a Request for Proposals to find the best operator. The Downtowner won the bid due to their superior mobile application, operational know-how with the vehicles, and innovative ideas. Throughout the process, Downtowner has been a great partner.

We worked hard to ensure the service is complementary not competitive to other transportation options and are proud the monthly reports show our main bus hub is in the top 3 pick-up/drop-off locations.

## Downtown Shines

Another benefit of the program is the tremendous exposure and community support it has garnered for the Tampa Downtown Partnership. The vehicles are heavily branded with our logo, iPads and brochures inside promote all the great downtown amenities, including other transportation options, and the drivers serve as an extension of our Ambassador program. Given the solution it has provided to residents, workers, business owners, and hotel concierges, the Downtowner free ride service has arguably been one of the most high-profile and best received project the Partnership has done in our 30+ year history. Traditional media has picked up on the service providing coverage in print and broadcast and we have seen a significant uptick in our social media mentions with photos of friends inside the vehicle with terms like "I love Downtown." The vehicles have also appeared in articles discussing the need for transportation options in our Downtown. Most notably, in December of 2016 the Downtowner and Partnership were featured in a *Tampa Bay Times* story by a local reporter, Susan Carlton, titled "How not to park in Tampa".

## The Evolution

We host regular meetings with select board members, the Downtowner owners, City of Tampa, Hillsborough Area Regional Transit, and the Florida Department of Transportation to discuss both short and long-term goals for the service. Due to the overwhelming demand and the rich data we learn from the app, we are constantly trying to find ways to improve the service.

A "combo" feature was added and announced in October 2017 in celebration of the service's one-year anniversary in Tampa. The new combo ride feature pairs riders with

similar travel destinations to be picked up by the same vehicle and promoting a shared-transit mentality.

Two Chevy Bolts were added to the 12- vehicle fleet of GEM cars in August 2017 to reduce wait times, support increasing ridership demand and provide riders with protection from the Florida heat via air conditioning. A “hub” system and introducing rider fares are under review for third year of service. With an annual budget exceeding \$1 million (for a 1.2 square mile area), the on-going financial support is key. Our organization has been contacted by virtually every adjacent neighborhood asking to expand the service. At present time the funding to do so remains elusive. We have also been contacted by numerous cities across the country asking about our business model.

### **In Conclusion**

Downtown free ride service has changed the way residents, workers, and visitors think about getting around Tampa’s Downtown. By understanding the needs and challenges of our city, the service is able to seamlessly complement existing transit modes while changing the behavior of our car-centric community with 100% electric vehicles – one hailed ride at a time.