



United Transcript  
Mpact Podcast Episode 81

## Transit to the Great Outdoors

With  
**Andrea Breault**, Transportation Director,  
Cascades East Transit;  
**Amy Schlappi**, Executive Director, Hood  
River County Transportation District;  
and  
**Corrie Parrish**, Senior Planner, Kittelson &

Associates

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[00:00:00]

**Corrie Parrish:** Hello, everyone. I'm Corey Parrish, Senior Planner with Kittelson Associates and a member of the Mpact National Steering Committee. As part of the National Steering Committee, I also chair the Mpact Innovators, a volunteer group that plans some really fun parts of the Mpact Conference, which is in Philly this year.

We do everything from a couple of walking tours to the very famous Mpact PK Slam powered by PechaKucha. Today, I'm happy to be here to lead a conversation with two amazing, strong women in transit agencies, helping to provide access to recreation destinations, part of the hashtag, opt outside movement.

But before we get into the topic too much further, let's find out a little bit more about our guests. Andrea tell me, what was the what was the moment that got you into transit work?

**Andrea Breault:** Sure. My name is Andrea Breault. I'm the transportation director for Cascades East Transit and we are Central Oregon's public transit service provider. And I will [00:01:00] say the moment that I decided to go into this industry, I was 20 years old, a college student, and I signed up to lay down traffic tubes on roadways in Ohio, and I started to record vehicle data traffic and put it into mapping software.

And that was 20 years ago. And so I kept with it.

**Corrie Parrish:** That's hilarious. I love that.

And Amy, tell me a little bit about you. How did you get into this work?

**Amy Schlappi:** Yeah, so my name is Amy Schlappi. I'm the Executive Director of Hood River County Transportation District. We do business as Columbia Area Transit. We are the public transportation provider in Hood River County in Oregon, but also provide services between Hood River County and the Portland metropolitan region and other areas, regional areas as well.

So I actually got into transit kind of by happenstance. Originally I was supposed to go into urban planning and then I graduated my master's [00:02:00] degree and it was in 2009. There still wasn't a lot of jobs in urban planning because of the housing fallout. And I needed a job, so I found a job at Zipcar in Washington, D.C., and I fell in love with operations and making alternative transportation options work. So I had a couple of different jobs in the private transportation industry, and then I made my way into public and I'm super excited about it.

**Corrie Parrish:** Lovely. So transit access is important for a variety of reasons. It's important because it provides access to medical appointments, groceries, schools, jobs, but I think recreation often gets overlooked and recreation access is very important. 28 million Americans don't have access to a park within a 10 minute walk of their home, according to the Trust for Public [00:03:00] Land. In addition there's several studies and, it ranges now, but it can be up to 30 percent of pedestrian and bike plans don't even consider access to recreation destinations. Let's start with Amy. But, I'd love for you to talk about how CAT got into providing transit access to the Columbia Gorge.

**Amy Schlappi:** The Hood River County transportation District, was actually established in the 1990s, but we were primarily demand response until, 2017, when we started focusing on fixed route and my predecessor, Patty Fink, did a lot of amazing work to get us where we are today. And started several initiatives, one of them being, Gorge Mountain Express, which connects Hood River and Mount Hood Meadows. We also have a couple local routes, and we have the Columbia [00:04:00] Gorge Express which used to be served by ODOT, and we took it over in 2019, and that travels between Hood River and Portland and then we have some seasonal routes. Our additional seasonal routes dog

mountain shuttle which only operates in April, May and June during the wild flower season. And that is to get people to a very popular hiking trail.

**Corrie Parrish:** Yeah, and I just found out about the shuttle, and I'm a little bit disappointed because the wildflower season's almost over. And that's a great incentive to avoid the parking permit, which I'll circle back around in a minute. But Andrea. Tell me about Cascades East Transit and how recreation service started there.

I believe it started with Ride the River and expanded from there.

**Andrea Breault:** And similar to Columbia Area Transit there was a transition from the City of Bend handing over those transit services to our Council of Governments that [00:05:00] I worked for in 2009. And so in the early 2010s recreation being a major attraction here in Central Oregon, we started with Ride the River, which is a service in which our public transit buses meet at a large park and ride, which we call park and float.

We pick up individuals that have tubes and paddle boards. We drop them off at an area along the Deschutes River. They then paddle down the river and we pick them up about two to two hours later, it takes them to travel that distance. We pick them up at another park and bring them back to the park and ride.

And the reason the service is so successful is because it eliminates what we call the two car program, where people need to logistically figure out how to park two vehicles. And so we were able to solve that both with other partners in the agency, such as Bend Parks and Rec and Tumalo Creek and Kayak, which is a tube vendor.

We've expanded to work with other Tube vendors in the [00:06:00] region, and we've also expanded recreational services, such as Lava Butte, where bus travels up to the top of 1 of our buttes through the summer season, as well as we introduced Mount Batchelor summer service in 2023, where we drop people off at certain hiking trail heads and a lot of folks either will pick up the shuttle after they're done hiking, or they bring up their mountain bike and then actually bike back down into town.

And so we are in the piloting program of that and we will continue that for another two years and seek out additional funding to continue that.

**Corrie Parrish:** Thanks. How do you incentivize using transit? Unfortunately, transit does get a bad rap of taking too long and, some of these destinations are pretty far out there and are, easily accessible by car. Can you tell me a little bit more, Andrea, about how you incentivize the transit service?

**Andrea Breault:** Sure. So we do a lot of physical promotion and what I mean is [00:07:00] we put a lot of A frames out saying, shuttle over here, pick up the shuttle at this location. We also work closely with a lot of the tourism agencies here in Central Oregon, whether that's Visit Bend, the hotels, the restaurants. And so what we're doing is we're pinpointing the marketing to all the visitors.

That come into this area, primarily June, July and August on that way, when they come here for family activities they recognize that there is a system in place to make these activities easy and convenient and accessible. And so there's a lot of marketing that goes into the month of May and early June before they start.

**Corrie Parrish:** And with the Ride the River float, you work with a outfitter to provide floats so people don't have to bring their own floats, although they have the option to bring their own floats if they want.

**Andrea Breault:** Correct. And so we do work with the biggest vendor in the area is Tumalo Creek and kayak. And they actually sell bus fares on our [00:08:00] behalf. So we do have a sales agreement with them. And that way it's a one stop package for people and families to purchase their bus ticket. It's actually a wristband because we recognize they're floating the river and we don't want them to carry anything that wristband is good throughout the day.

They also pick up their tubes. They signed waivers in terms of safety and recognizing what's expected along with the shoots river. And so having that kind of 1 stop shop allows families to participate pretty easily and that park and ride. Serves as a great meeting location for everybody to meet, have their supplies and then be able to go home or back to a hotel pretty easily.

And besides Tamela Creek, we actually signed with sun country. They are a division of Mount bachelor that also provides summer equipment for the river and latitude 44, which is a new private company providing stand up paddle boards. So we're getting the word out there. And spreading the activities as we can.

**Corrie Parrish:** That's [00:09:00] awesome. Yeah, I'm actually planning a site visit with a client, because they're trying to launch a river shuttle program, and I'm really excited to bring my paddle boards out there and bend the summer. Amy, tell me about how your transit agency incentivizes transit service over personal car use.

**Amy Schlappi:** Yeah there are 2 are 3 main services that serve recreational sites. So it's the gorge to mountain express. The Columbia Gorge express was served, which serves, and then dog mountain shuttle, which serves the dog mountain trail. They all do it in different ways. I think that the biggest motivator and incentivization is that you don't have to worry about parking or paying any fees if you take transit.

Gorge to Mountain Express, in order to get from Hood River to Mount Hood Meadows, you need to travel along Highway 35. Which with winter conditions can be pretty dicey and for the most part people really don't like driving highway 35. [00:10:00] So if you give them a cheap, convenient option which we do with the Gorsham Mountain Express, then they're going to choose to use that.

We go several times a day and we also add or offer services so people can go night skiing, which is great for the locals. There is minimal or limited parking at Mount Hood Meadows. So having that bus is a great option for people so they don't have to worry about parking, but also it gets them right up to the front door of Meadows.

So they don't have to lug their gear from their vehicle. So that actually helps a lot. We do a lot of marketing with Mount Hood Meadows. They're a wonderful partner. Also Visit Hood River is a great partner as well. And some local businesses will also promote our services. To use the bus to get up to Mount Hood Meadows in the winter for the Columbia Gorge Express.

For people who want to go to and from, of Multnomah Falls, we have a lot of wonderful partners [00:11:00] in odot, the US Forest Service State parks. They all help get the message out that you should use transit to get to Mulah Falls. There is a lot of congestion at the parking lot. That can be used to access the falls and during the summer, there's even a timed use permit program.

That we assist with, and if you ride transit, you do not have to worry about the time use permit. So those kind of all help to encourage people to use transit

over their private vehicles, and it helps everybody just access the falls in a safer way for dog mountain. It's a very similar situation. The parking lot that serves the dog mountain trail.

Is very small and there's not a lot of space and in order to access it during the busy time or the wildflower season where it's super utilized and popular. You have to have a permit to do it, but if you take transit, you don't [00:12:00] have to have that permit. And again, the US Forest Service community county city of Stevenson are all wonderful partners in order to make.

That and washed out. Sorry are all wonderful partners to make that service happen.

**Corrie Parrish:** Awesome. I'm thinking about the equipment for recreation for hikers. It's not that much. I guess it's just a backpack, but for skiers and snowboarders, there's their skis and boards. I personally like to use my own paddle board when I go to bed to use your shuttle service. So can you talk about how you store the equipment on your buses?

**Andrea Breault:** Sure. So I'll start with ride the river. We actually have some homegrown trailers that we built. And the reason we built them is we wanted to ensure that the length of the trailer does not trigger what we call a class a commercial driver's license. So that's something that was important to us.

All of our drivers are licensed for class B. So we wanted to make sure that the length was not. [00:13:00] Too long in terms of navigating the downtown area bend same with the ski boxes. For our ski service they are a three hitched box that we adhere to the back of the vehicle that allows for easy loading and unloading.

So you can imagine with equipment, we do have to Put in the time in terms of unloading and loading, which is not normal in public transit as people get their equipment or put it back on with the tubes. We're actually just replacing the netting as we speak, which allows us to build those tubes higher.

Without spilling and flying off the roadway there. So yes, equipment is pretty important. We're continually looking at innovative ways to store equipment and buy vehicles that will allow for that type of activity.

**Corrie Parrish:** And Amy,



**Amy Schlappi:** So for the Columbia Gorge Express, we have a large amount of people who like to take their bikes with them on that service. [00:14:00] So we have extra bike racks on the back of those vehicles that serve that service specifically. For the Gorge to Mountain service, we use old city buses. So they will take their boards or their skis with them and just hold them.

In their space, as you can imagine, that gets a little more difficult when we have very full buses. We have recently went after a grant to add. More room for the recreational gear, so we're actually looking to purchase new buses that have attachments on the back. That people can store their skis and board, so it keeps it out of the main cabin of the bus.

**Corrie Parrish:** you must have been reading my mind because funding was my next question. So let's talk about funding, because I know that's on everybody's minds. Can you talk about how you've historically gotten funding, how you've been creative with funding, and then some of the challenges that you've had with funding?[00:15:00]

And I'll start with Amy.

**Amy Schlappi:** And so I think probably our most challenging service with funding is the Gorge to Mountain Express. It is considered a a service of high importance in Oregon. And we have traditionally gone after federal, so flat funds, federal.

**Corrie Parrish:** Federal land taxes program.

**Amy Schlappi:** Yes, thank you. But those have not always been reliable in the sense of when we get them.

It just, they're a little bit slower to be obligated to recipients after being awarded. So we've been working with ODOT in order to fund. The service last year and this year and then working on different solutions for the next biennial. So that one's been difficult. We have in the past gotten some grant match funds from Mount Hood Meadows, which has been very helpful.

And last year there was some match fund help from [00:16:00] the school district as well. And then Dog Mountain, we actually receive funds from WashDOT in order to serve that or operate that service. And then we also get

funds from City of Stevenson, the Forest Service, and media County. The Columbia Gorge Express is funded through state funds through odot.

**Corrie Parrish:** So lots of partners, basically. Yeah.

**Amy Schlappi:** Lots of partners and a lots of trying to be as strategic as possible with funding these different programs.

**Corrie Parrish:** Yeah. Yeah, flap is a great funding resource, but it definitely has a sunset. Andrea, how have you been creative with the flat funding over in bed?

**Andrea Breault:** Sure, so to your point, Cori, yes, funding is always a struggle with recreation. Our formulaic federal funding speaks to our core public transits, but there are [00:17:00] no Formula or reliable funding that can go into these rec services. We've historically applied for federal lands access program flap funding.

For capital purchases to start these programs. So Mount bachelor ride, the river and lava buttes vehicles are all funded by older flap capital grants. And we actually just received a new flap capital grant to replace our vehicles that are now hitting 14 years old. And so we've leaned on flap for capital.

For operating, it is a combination of funding similar to what Amy said. We have fairs that help predominantly offset some of the operational costs as well as partner relationships in the recreational community. Mount Batchelor LLC, which is owned by Powder Corporation, does provide the bulk of funding for our winter ski service. [00:18:00]

And the benefit there is we do transport all of their employees up to the mountain at no cost. They recognize they do not have the parking lot space to have all of their employees there. And also it's cost prohibitive for some of the lower paid positions at Mount Bachelor to spend the gas money to get up the mountain.

So we provide that transportation for free and they help provide the cost to operate the service. We are always thinking creatively and strategically on how to apply more funding. I will say for Ride the River and Lava Butte, The fares do cover the cost of operations simply because the distance we're traveling is not that far and we're able to pack those buses on short distance.



So we do have a fare box recovery of a 100 percent for Ride the River and Lava Butte.

**Corrie Parrish:** That's amazing. The, this kind of brought up 2 questions for me, because you both touched on different equity populations, schools and employment. [00:19:00] So I'd love to hear from both of you how does your service try to provide. Equitable access to the outdoors and then also thinking about pairs of funding. Andrea, why don't you go.

**Andrea Breault:** I will say here in Bend for those that are familiar with the community, it is a high end recreational town to put it bluntly. And so I think CET does a great job of serving communities that don't necessarily have Expensive mountain bikes or can purchase some type of ticket through these vendors that provide recreational experience for people that want to visit.

So we provide the anybody from the public can board our bus take a picture or two within the cascades and then hop back on the bus for Lava Butte. For folks that may not be able to hike up the butte based on their age or ability. We provide that transportation for people to experience the outdoors that may not physically be able to participate the [00:20:00] way that some of the more extreme recreational sports do here.

All of our vehicles are required to be ADA accessible. And so we do have folks that we will pick up in a chair or a walker. And that way they can experience the outdoors. Even if they're not physically able to participate the way other folks do

**Corrie Parrish:** And Amy,

**Amy Schlappi:** We try to do a lot of the same things. We also. Try to partner and do outreach with different community based organizations that represent. The different disadvantaged community members that are in our community. I mentioned that the school district the ski team will use our service to get to and from the mountain for practice, which is great.

And we encourage that we do our best to provide services where. Students can use it. So I'll leave after school. But also the night services is really important to [00:21:00] me because that is the time when locals can go up to the mountain and they typically have the night skiing options rather than the full access passes that Mount Hood Meadows offers.

So offering. Those different service time options are very important. So they don't only just serve visitors to the area who can go anytime during the day. I think it's just really important to work with our community partners and ensure. That they're given access to our travel trainer who can go with those different community members, teach them how to use the bus.

We do fairly regular trips to Multnomah Falls where our travel trainer will take community members, show them how to get there and show them the falls if they've never been there and then how to get home again.

**Corrie Parrish:** how long have you had the travel trainer.

**Amy Schlappi:** About two years.

**Corrie Parrish:** [00:22:00] That's a great idea. Let me use that in my current project.

**Amy Schlappi:** Yeah it's really helpful. And I think our travel trainer actually did a project with the Multnomah County travel trainers. That's the project I'm thinking of, Corey.

**Corrie Parrish:** Yeah,

**Amy Schlappi:** And so that might be a great connection. Okay. Sorry. Back on task.

**Corrie Parrish:** that's part of it.

Can you tell the story because I've had the opportunity to work with you on multiple transit recreation projects at this point. Can you tell the story about the high school student, the troubled high school student, and where he's at today, as a result of

**Amy Schlappi:** Yeah. So, there was a high school student who was on the ski team he was not doing so great in school. And he was working with the teacher who is the ski team coach and, he didn't have access to a car, so having access to transit was the only [00:23:00] way that he was able to participate in the ski team, and he really enjoyed the ski team, and really excelled at skiing and today, I believe he is Out there competing in different ski competitions around the world.

And he would not have had access to that if it weren't for transit and his awesome teacher who works well with students who aren't doing so great to find ways that they can excel.

**Corrie Parrish:** Yeah, that's so important because we can look at statistics all day and, numbers do tell a story, but having that personal connection of that 1 student and where they're at today. And when you magnify that by all the people that. Get access to recreation and how it benefits not just physical health, but mental health it really does change the world for the better?

I'm skiing. I'm not a skier. I actually hate snow. But [00:24:00] I would love to hear from both of you how seasonality plays a role in your transit operations.

**Andrea Breault:** sure. I'll start. Similar to me, you're when it comes to operations and labor force, this is tough because the seasonality meeting the actual hours a driver will drive. Is dependent on weather and where we are within the season. And so we've actually developed enough recreational services that we deem the title full time seasonal driver, which means that we are actually ending our Mount bachelor ski service this Sunday.

And 2 weeks from now, we will start our summer services and so that we can always put those drivers on some extra hours within the system or clean buses, or we encourage them to take vacation and time off before the next service happens. I will say from a labor force perspective, these programs have allowed us to [00:25:00] essentially fill the calendar that allows us to put full time bus drivers into these services.

And the more services we develop the more economies of scale we can build with the workforce and it makes it easier to find help.

**Corrie Parrish:** what about wildfires?

**Andrea Breault:** Sure. I know fires are probably a little bit more prevalent here in the high desert. I will say. On a service perspective, this is where we do have what we call our tiered. Frequency for our services. If we do have smoke in the air, we tend to have lesser frequency because simply we have less people participating in these programs.

I will say the year 2020 was the worst for us in which we've actually had to cancel service. For a solid week given the air quality in the state and making

sure that our drivers were safe. But I will say that involves a lot of prep work. So that our services are actually [00:26:00] meeting the demands of what the weather is doing.

So we've built those schedules over time. For ride the river, we have what we call our 2, 3 and our 4 bus schedule same with Mount bachelor as we are entering the month of May. We start to reduce frequency, but those schedules have been built over time and we plug and play with the technology and putting.

A less frequent schedule as a season ends.

**Corrie Parrish:** And can you just touch on how you communicate that out to the public?

**Andrea Breault:** So I will say we have various methods, both on the physical side of Marketing and communication, whether that's flyers and brochures. And then we have over time really developed our real time app that we promote passio which allows people to see the schedule as well as the bus, operating on the earth in real time.

And we all put disclaimers in to say, weather dependent. Please look at the schedule. We also have a seven [00:27:00] person call center. You will get a human being if you call our number from the hours of 6 a. m. to about 7 p. m. Monday through Friday. And so we always encourage people to give us a call and we will tell you exactly what the schedule is for that day.

**Corrie Parrish:** All right, Amy, how do you deal with snow?

**Amy Schlappi:** Here in the gorge, we do deal with it on a regular basis. So for us, we deal with the seasonality of our services very similar to Andrea. We have several services throughout the year. We don't necessarily have just a specific designation of a project.

Seasonal full time employee, but we do have a number of different services. That kind of they coordinate really well with each other. So once we're done with 1, we can move. That driver to another service and so it just, it seems to flow pretty well. With snow in general, it can add some difficulties, [00:28:00] especially with the road conditions on highway 35.

There have been times where we've had to shut down the service because it's just unsafe for our drivers to operate. And we communicate that through text alerts, through our website, through social media. And we also have people in the office. So if you call our number, you're going to get a human. Snow will impact are less recreational based services as well. And we notify people in the same way, and it's also a little easier on our Columbia Gorge express service. Because that operates on IV4 and so ODOT will shut down IV4. And so that makes it really easy. That's when we shut down as well.

Do you wanna talk about how, uh, how the buses were used in the Eagle Creek fire in 2017?

**Amy Schlappi:** Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of information on that because it was before my time. But with any type of wildfire event, or [00:29:00] just any natural disaster event in the gorge. We do work with our emergency management team. And are available in case they need larger buses and drivers who can drive class B vehicles this past winter.

We did help as well. The power had gone out in cascade locks. And we work with their emergency management team to help remove some residents from Kesky Locks to Hood River so they can be at a warming shelter.

**Andrea Breault:** And to add to.

**Corrie Parrish:** cool.

**Andrea Breault:** Amy's comment. We similarly, cascades East Transit has signed a Tri-County state of emergency Agreement that in short in the case of a state of emergency here in the region, we forfeit all of our resources over to the community as well as our drivers if they wanna drive, so that we could handle either.

Some type of evacuation related to some type of emergency

**Corrie Parrish:** That's a really cool because then it's, [00:30:00] it's still recreation service, but then you're also helping with an evacuation event and natural disasters. Unfortunately, are becoming more and more common. Let's move over to fares. I know that in both cases, fares have increased over the years for these services.

So I'd love for each of you to discuss what the fair started off as and then why it has increased. And how you are trying to address equity with those increases. Andrea, why don't you start?

**Andrea Breault:** door. From a policy perspective at Cascades transit, their policy is recommended through our regional committee, which is then brought to the board. And that stands for central Oregon intergovernmental council, which is the council of governments I report to and so that is the required chain of command in terms of how we.

Increase affair, so it is not arbitrary. It does go through a protocol. I will say, in the beginning of these rec services, you're [00:31:00] looking at, 1 or 2 dollar fares right now. Our most expensive fare is Mount bachelor winter where we provide fares of 14 dollars round trip for the day. We also provide a 300 seasonal pass which is pretty effective.

You're looking at cents per day. If you decide to ride every day and go skiing. I will say in terms of fair equity we have only increased. Prices when we do see a drastic increase in our own operating cost. 2 years ago, we did receive a 30 percent increase in all of our health care insurance that goes to pay for our employees.

We are self insured through Deschutes County and so we have made the argument that we will only increase. Fares if approved by the board, depending on our operational cost at that time. And that does include fuel, preventative maintenance, bus parts and [00:32:00] labor.

**Amy Schlappi:** We have increased our fares for the Gorge to Mountain Express once. It, initially when we implemented the service, it was free, and then we increased that amount to 5 round trip. For our dark mountain shuttle that is free because of all the partners and the local support that we have for that the Columbia Gorge Express is 10 if you're going between one of the different locations and Portland or Maloma Falls.

And it is a dollar if you're trying to go between Hood River and Cascade Locks. You can utilize our annual gorge pass on any of our service. It's good for a year and for unlimited rides. We do keep it we have tried very hard to keep it low cost in order to ensure that our locals have access. To these different services so that started off as 30 dollars [00:33:00] for a year for an adult.

That has increased by 10 to 40. And the justification there was when we increased it to 40, It also increased access to not just our services, but the link services in Wasco County Mount Adams Transportation Service in Klickitat County, and Skamania County Transit in Skamania County. Anytime we increase any of our fares, we go to the Hood River County Transportation District Board, which is who I report to, and we have to do a public process in order to do that.

So we've really tried hard to keep the fares low for the locals, and then also we've used the strategy that if we keep our annual pass, Low enough, it could be seen as an easy incentive for folks from Portland who come out to the gorge at least a couple of times a year to [00:34:00] buy a pass instead of necessarily doing the one way fare and then that local pass, or sorry, that annual pass.

Helps fund a lot of the local or local programs that we offer to our community.

**Corrie Parrish:** So this kind of brings me a little bit back but I was thinking about partnerships with the funding as well and operations, and I'd love to hear from both of you , both the benefits and the challenges of working with different partners. Andrea, in specific, I'd love to hear about working with Tumalo Creek and then Amy, I think Hood Meadows would be a good example.

Andrea, why don't you go?

**Andrea Breault:** Sure, so I would say the benefit of working with partners, such as Temelo Creek is the economies of scale that agencies or. Company like, there's as well brings in that population based and so they're doing marketing as well for all of their equipment and the activities they provide. And so we do have a great [00:35:00] partnership.

Like I said, we have a sales agreement. We also have what's called a sponsorship agreement where we will sponsor and kayak in terms of ads on our buses. I will say the challenge that we all face as a public transit provider is that we don't want to dip into what we call chartered service, meaning we provide.

Service to a particular demographic for a particular time of day, which is not allowed under our agency. We are public transit agency 1st, which means we are open to the public scheduled and we do not discriminate towards any.



Group time or person we provide that public transit, no matter what's going to happen in terms of someone else's business or what they're trying to sell.

And so just reminding our partners here in central Oregon that we have to maintain an open schedule. For the public to use and anybody is willing to board and you can imagine those [00:36:00] conversations need to be reinforced every year. We are not a private service for a particular recreational need.

**Corrie Parrish:** Yeah, definitely. Amy, what about you?

**Amy Schlappi:** Yeah, I think working with partners is there's always a challenge, right? Because we all need to meet the needs of our our customers. And for us being a public transit agency, we need to meet the needs of. The general public and the general public. We, I think my head Meadows is a wonderful partner and they do a lot of advertising for us, which really helps.

They. On their website, when they have where they have their transportation options, we are there. And it's clearly communicated how people can use our service in order to get to mount head Meadows. And they also help us with operational help as well because, there's winter conditions up there.

Sometimes. Buses get stuck in snow, or there's different issues that happen and [00:37:00] because they have transportation staff on site we're able to work really well with that. And I really appreciate them for that. We also. Allow them to have an agreement where they can, stop at our location so that their employees can utilize our park and ride service and hop on either their employee buses or even our buses as well in order to get up to work. So that works really well, and they're a, just a big community supporter in general. I think just partners are really important. I think the US board.

**Corrie Parrish:** Yeah.

**Amy Schlappi:** Yeah, the U. S. Forest Service and ODOT and Oregon State Parks, we just wouldn't be able to do our services if we didn't have the strong relationships that we have with them.

**Corrie Parrish:** Definitely. And I think partnerships are even more important because for you to because you both represent rural transit agency. So I want to shift the conversation a little bit to talk about that. Both the benefits and

the challenges of working for a really [00:38:00] small transit agency and still being able to provide these services, because there is a certain large transit agency that just recently cut access to several parks.

And it's because of funding issues. So I can't totally blame them. But, Because you're so small, you do deal with more restrictive funding and also just people and capacity. So I'd love to hear about your perspectives of working for a rural transit agency. Let's start with Amy.

**Amy Schlappi:** We're small we're not big, so we have 13 buses that operate I have 25 employees. And we do a lot with that. In fiscal year 23, we served 80,000 writers. And

**Corrie Parrish:** mean, but mighty.

**Amy Schlappi:** yeah so I think a lot of people, when they see our services they think we're a lot bigger than we actually are and we are a [00:39:00] rural transit system.

And we don't have the funding resources that. Those bigger organizations have and we do a lot with little resources. I think that's the big thing and we're able to do that because we've got a lot of great community partners who believe in public transit.

**Corrie Parrish:** absolutely. Andrea, how tiny is your organization?

**Andrea Breault:** We are slightly bigger than Amy's organization. We have a fleet of roughly 75 vehicles, probably an employee base of 80 to 90 folks, but we are lean on the administrative side. I would say of all of our employees, 95 percent of them are in the operations, which is dispatchers, call centers, vehicle operators.

I will say our biggest challenge is the geographical area that we serve. If you were to take the state of Delaware or Rhode Island, that is probably what we serve. Our most northern point, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs all the way down to the city of Lapine in southern Deschutes County.

So the geographical [00:40:00] coverage is challenging. You can imagine those dollars don't go as far when you're traveling. Quite a long distance to pick up. Not a lot of people. And so that is where we really need to be strategic with

our rural funding. The other challenge that we have here in central Oregon, even though it is 2024 is dirt roads.

Unfortunately, we do not allow our buses to go down some of these uneven. Old logging roads where a lot of our most vulnerable people live. A lot of it's communicating whether we can get those folks family members can drop them off to locations where we can pick them up. I understand Bend is a vibrant community, a very expensive place to live.

But there are pockets of prime bill of pine sister's country where there are vulnerable people living in mobile home parks off of old logging roads that need to get to dialysis. The veteran community that needs to get to mental health services. And so a lot of the time and effort is trying to figure out how we can best [00:41:00] serve these people both from a logistical perspective as well as a funding perspective.

**Amy Schlappi:** I'd like to add on to that. That is a big piece of what we do. We have 30 percent of our population is low income population and then we also have a lot of high income earners in our county as well and really trying to meet the needs of. The different groups, but also of visitors as well can be really challenging.

And we have to be very creative with funding, but also with how we market our services, but also how we schedule our services. I think that goes back to my example for the Gorge to express of ensuring that there's. Transit service, so people can go do night skiing. Is really important. But also for our Columbia Gorge express service, ensuring that we have so we have 7 to 9 trips depending on the season a [00:42:00] day that go in between Portland.

Ensuring that those times can work for a number of use cases is super important. So people can go to medical services. So people can go to work. So people can go to the airport. All of those are served within the same service.

**Corrie Parrish:** And you both serve multiple counties, correct? And then you serve two

**Amy Schlappi:** River County, but we do operate in multiple counties, and we do go across the street, the river as well into Washington.

**Corrie Parrish:** and

**Andrea Breault:** And c. T. Serves three counties, confederated tribes of Warm Springs. Also, what is difficult and adds to some of the administrative burden is the majority of the funding we eventually receive actually comes through to shoots Crookerson, Jeff Jefferson County, as well as the tribes. And then we build pass through agreements.

We are not a transit district. And [00:43:00] so then we have to build the pass through agreements to eventually receive the funding that ultimately goes to the counties.

**Corrie Parrish:** Definitely. It's been lovely to interview you both. I've been also very lucky to work with you both on multiple transit to recreation projects and I'm excited to continue that work into the future. I think my final question that I would like to ask is. If there's one lesson or a couple, depending that you want to share with other transit agencies and partners that are looking to try to start a service, whether it be ride the river mouth Hood River to the, or the Gorge Mountain Express.

Yes, that one. I don't use it because it's skiing. I don't like snows. But Columbia Gorge Express. Yes, I love that service. What is one lesson that you'd like to share with people? And let's start with [00:44:00] Andrea.

**Andrea Breault:** Sure, and I will say this to both Amy and myself is you have to be creative. There is a lot of folks in the transit agency that have been here for a number of years and the 1st answer is no, we can't do that. And I will say both Amy and I will always come into a situation and try to figure out how we can do it.

It may be, it takes time there may be a few steps backwards but you have to have a creative mindset. You have to have an open mind to do this and so I would say that is what's make this possible take the blinders off, figure out what you can do with funding try not to look back in the past, look forward into the future, see what's plausible, and for the most part, our partners such as ODOT and the FTA will help you if the ultimate goal is to serve people.

**Amy Schlappi:** Agreed, a hundred percent.

**Corrie Parrish:** Anything else?

**Amy Schlappi:** I, I think just to add on to that, it's start the conversation early, [00:45:00] and find those creative thinkers in those partner organizations. Who are willing to brainstorm with you but also use your employees say, Hey we're going to think creatively here. We want to solve this problem. What are your thoughts?

How do we do this? And just get the conversation started. And then when you're at these different meetings or conferences, or just out in the community, you can have those conversations like, Hey, we want to do this. What are your thoughts? And you're going to get a lot of amazing feedback, and at least my experience have given me a lot of good contacts and stepping stones.

**Corrie Parrish:** Absolutely. And I echo both of what you said just based on my experience, helping to develop transit service. services to recreation destinations. You have to be creative. And to be honest, I've found that there are far more people willing to help and get something launched than there are [00:46:00] people that say no.

And it's like a little nice blow up moment when you do get it launched and expanded in front of the person that said no. With that can you both tell me how we can find you? Should people want to reach out to you to learn more about your services?

**Amy Schlappi:** So you can reach out to me at amyatcatransit.org, or you can check out our website at ridecatbus.org. We don't transport cats, I promise. I'm sorry, I know that sucks.

**Corrie Parrish:** Even if they're in a backpack, because

**Amy Schlappi:** if they're in a carrier, yes, we will.

**Corrie Parrish:** that's becoming a thing with millennials.

**Amy Schlappi:** But we primarily transport people. But yeah, check out our website, check out our social media. Columbiaareatransit on Facebook and Instagram.

**Andrea Breault:** And for Cascades East transit, if you just type in Cascades East transit into Google will be the 1st website that you hit. You could also contact

me. My email address is my 1st initial a, my last [00:47:00] name, bro. B. R. E. A. U. L. T. at. C. O. I. C. dot org.

**Corrie Parrish:** To our listeners, if you're not in Oregon, I hope you come and visit and use these transit services. And if you are in Oregon, you better be using these transit services. And with that, thank you for listening. And I hope to see you at Mpact in October in Philadelphia. Thanks y'all.