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From the Columbus Business First:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/columbus/news/2020/06/24/cota-expanding-on-demand-rides.html>

COTA expanding on-demand rides to more suburbs, explores loading fares on state food benefit cards

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The coronavirus pandemic is changing how and where people work, and COTA says it needs to follow – while helping reduce inequities for its low-income passengers.

As the Central Ohio Transit Authority restores services after suspending several routes because of falling demand and funding, don't expect every route to come back on the same paths and schedules, CEO Joanna Pinkerton told trustees Wednesday.

"We know our community will move differently," Pinkerton said. "We will need to adapt as things adapt and evolve."

Service changes through summer and fall will respond to the needs of workers to get to areas where jobs are concentrated, she said.

That includes expanding the use of on-demand microtransit, she said.

COTA Plus sends branded vans when summoned via app; normal fares apply except for free rides when the destination is a regular bus stop. In many cases it could be more efficient and provide better customer service than fixed routes.

The board on Wednesday approved extending COTA Plus in Grove City under a contract with New York City-based Via Transportation Inc. The service debuted as a pilot last July.

Westerville will roll out COTA Plus starting in August. It was delayed from a June start date because of the pandemic. City Council approved a \$225,000 contract in March; the vendor named was not immediately available.

A three-month COTA Plus pilot that started at the end of May serves the northeast quadrant of Franklin County, including Westerville, New Albany, Gahanna and job centers such as Mount Carmel East hospital and Easton. The shuttles pick up and drop off at bus stops, replacing fixed routes that have been suspended during the pandemic. Fares are free, as they have been on buses to keep riders and drivers from having to interact.

COTA is exploring ways to extend cashless transactions to more customers when it starts charging fares again, Pinkerton said.

"Cashless is not only the right thing to do for ensuring people have a safe and healthy transaction," Pinkerton said. "It's also an equity issue."

The 52% of riders who use cash – among the community's most vulnerable, she said – are paying full fare. But downtown workers using C-Pass ride free, and those who buy monthly passes or bulk passes via the agency's app get discounts.

The agency is in early talks with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services to load fares onto magnetic-strip EBT cards used for food benefits, Pinkerton said. If a pilot is successful, it could spread to transit agencies statewide.

JFS officials were not immediately available for comment. Staff hope to bring a plan to the board in August, Pinkerton said.

"We're absolutely committed to finding a solution," she said.



MADDIE MCGARVEY

COTA CEO Joanna Pinkerton: Adding more cashless ways to pay fares will keep riders safe and improve equity.

COTA has stretched its traditional role to help reduce inequity, such as parking a bus at the north side YMCA that provides wireless internet in a 100-foot radius to Columbus school students, and by helping deliver 18,000 family meal kits from Columbus Urban League and Bob Evans.

“Six weeks ago, I would not have told you we would be in the food delivery business,” Pinkerton said. “I’m very proud that COTA is part of this conversation about what’s equitable.”

Also Wednesday, trustees approved a combined five-year and long-term strategic plan through 2050, and elected new leadership:

Craig Treneff was elected chairman, succeeding Trudy Bartley. He is an attorney with Treneff Cozza Law LLC and a Westerville City Council member.

The board added two new members: Jennifer Gallagher, director of the Columbus Department of Public Service, and Julie Sloat, senior vice president for treasury and risk at American Electric Power Company Inc.

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