RE:CONNECT
ROCHESTER

June 20, 2025

RE: RTS On Demand Changes

Dear Mr. Velázquez,

Thank you for the invitation to provide input to RTS's proposed changes to its On Demand Service in Monroe County. Reconnect Rochester champions transportation options that enable vibrant and equitable communities in Monroe County. **RTS On Demand service provides an essential transportation option to connect residents to jobs, medical facilities, and other critical resources located in the towns and suburbs of Monroe County.** Reconnect Rochester offers this feedback with the intention to help ensure the availability of affordable, reliable service, a positive rider experience, and fair treatment of RTS riders.

This feedback is informed by RTS On Demand riders we've heard from through an online input form and through Voices of Transit/Transit Ambassadors, Reconnect Rochester's own staff research and experience as riders, and advice from Board and Advocacy Committee members.

Overall Feedback to Your Plan

The announced changes to RTS On Demand may lead to increased ride fulfilment for a select group of riders capable of navigating the complexities of scheduling and virtual stops, but **we feel it will not provide an enhanced experience for the majority of riders.** Many customers we've heard from tried On Demand a few times and did not return to the service due to difficulty in using it. We fear the proposed changes will only exacerbate the problems with the service.

RTS On Demand was an experiment in how to provide service to certain parts of Monroe County. **Given its continued challenges, we would recommend RTS use its planning resources to explore returning to the fixed route system that previously existed.**

Time and again, we have heard from riders **a preference for a service that has designated stops and a set timetable when the bus will reliably come.** Our conversations with riders, including through Transit Ambassadors, confirm that RTS On Demand has had challenges providing a service that works for all users, with most feedback citing low fulfillment rates and vehicles that failed to find passengers at designated pickup locations. When the service did work, a door-to-door service was highly appreciated, but the usefulness is limited by the restriction of staying within the zones. A new fixed route service could use the smaller vehicles

from the mobility hubs and have a fixed route running on a regular schedule around that mobility zone. RTS has the ability to study expanding beyond the pre-Reimagine fixed routes to cover more areas using the Origin & Destination study results and the ridership data you've gathered over the last several years to identify the destinations where people need to go.

Focusing on the specific policy changes announced, we will address each one in turn.

No-Show and Cancellation Policy

The additional notifications are positive. The more and different ways you can notify the rider the vehicle is on its way, the higher likelihood of a made connection.

Your announcement cites 30,000 no shows each year. We would like to request more detail on this system data. For example, how many no-shows can be attributed to drivers being directed to a different place than where the passenger was actually standing? We would like to avoid basing this no-show policy choice on data that penalized a passenger who was in the place they understood they should be, but for various technology or built environment reasons, the vehicle didn't come to the spot.

Regarding the cancellation policy requirement of 3 hours notice, if a ride needs to be canceled, we think that **1 hour is sufficient time for a driver and the technology platform to readjust the trip**, given the relatively small geographical space in the zones the vehicles are covering.

While we can understand the intention to avoid duplicate bookings and wasted trips, **the introduction of a policy to penalize riders by blocking them from the system seems extreme. The risk of unfair punishment is high when riders report that no-shows/cancellations are often due to a technology/system failure.** Alternatively, we would suggest that customer service reach out to the person to identify what barriers were leading to the no-show. If the customer account suspension policy is implemented, we would urge you to allow for a customer appeal process to ensure they have been fairly treated and that no-shows weren't really an error of the technology or operator.

A comment we received when soliciting input on the proposed plans puts bluntly our concern regarding penalizing customers for no-shows and cancellations:

"Hard to think of a worse idea than the 'virtual stop' combined with penalizing 'no shows'. There's no marker for the stop, so people don't really know if they're in the right place, and if they're not, they get dinged for a violation. No marker, no pad, no seat, no shelter, so if the van

is late you're miserable, and if you get too cold or hot or wet and give up, you risk a 'no show' violation."

Pre-Booking Window

The pre-booking window is being reduced to twelve hours. **We feel twenty-four hours would be better, which was confirmed by the people we surveyed who usually schedule 12-24 hours ahead of time.** The 12 hour window puts an undue burden on riders who use the service regularly to commute to work or to make essential medical appointments. For example, people who need to leave for work at 7 am can't book a trip until 7 pm the night before.

If 12 hours is maintained, we recommend the call center expand hours to take On Demand calls until much later. What would the person without a smartphone who needs an On Demand ride at 11 am the following day need to do to secure a ride? The risk of a vehicle not being available when the call is made the morning of the scheduled seems high.

Pick Up/Drop Off Adjustments (Virtual Stops)

Overall, we don't feel we have enough information to endorse or reject this proposal. While the concept isn't new in transit, we aren't aware of it being tested in Monroe County.

Several major questions remain with the virtual stop proposal:
- **Virtual stops would be better if they were in consistent locations.** Will people always go to the same virtual stop when they request service to their home or place of employment, or could it change from trip to trip? The map of virtual stops presented in the communications materials gives the impression there are fixed virtual stops, but it remains unclear if any virtual stops will remain the same from one trip to the next.
- "Centralized" virtual stops would be an improvement if they lead to more onboards per stop.
- **Virtual stops must be planned with walkability in mind.** While a virtual stop may be more convenient to a driver on one side of the road, and it is within ¼ of a mile of the person's house, the transit rider may be asked to cross a busy road or a road without sidewalks to meet the vehicle. This must be avoided. Virtual stops also need to be known to whoever "owns" the street. Streets need to be designed around these stops. Crosswalks, bike lanes, on-street parking, etc., need to accommodate these stops.
- **How can RTS ensure that a virtual stop will be accessible by foot during a snowy and icy time of the year?** With door-to-door, it's likely the requesting person has control over the snow/ice at their home or business. A virtual stop may be blocked by snow.

- We should anticipate home owners whose corners are used to pick up or drop off passengers complaining that a bus stop has been established near or on their property.
- Assuming there is some consistency to a virtual stop, **can the location of virtual stops be shared so local municipalities have an opportunity to provide amenities?** Over all of our surveys, seating and amenities at bus stops has been a top request of riders.

In summary, we value a predictable time and location, and riders are already struggling with the unpredictability and navigation of the On Demand service. As one rider put it (after citing glitches/issues with the On Demand app) "I'd rather just go out there and just wait for the bus." We hear many reports of "chasing the bus." Adding another layer of unpredictability, with stop locations that are unmarked and may move around, may pose added confusion and difficulty for customers to plan their daily travels. We're also concerned that stops that are not carefully selected and static leaves open the possibility of inconvenient or unsafe locations. Rather than virtual stops, we recommend unchanging, established corner locations instead that would provide customers with more choice and control.

Multi-modal Trip Planning

It makes sense to prioritize trips to fixed bus routes where they exist. At the same time, we can't blame riders for looking for an option that might work better for their schedule and would pick them up and drop them off much closer to their home and destination than a fixed route service. People look for ways to maximize their time. We recommend that riders be given the option of declining the RTS Connect trip offer, and choose to take On Demand instead.

The Lexington Zone stands out as a potential issue. The zone is surrounded by fixed route service, and had a RTS Connect route before Reimagine. **Given the fare increases for On Demand and the socio-economic profile of the Lexington Zone, this change will have a disparate impact on low-income people in this zone while having a lesser impact on other zones. We recommend that RTS restore fixed route service to Lexington to provide that additional option.** It's possible the On Demand zone may still be needed in addition to the Lexington fixed route, but funneling more people onto RTS Connect would result in more capacity to service On Demand riders in the zone.

Fare increases

The adjustment to the base fare makes sense, and aligns to a price structure that probably should have been in place from the outset. It is appreciated that the rate will increase progressively throughout the next few years and that RTS is announcing it all at once. However, given the huge disparity between the increased fares and the cost of running the service, **it is better to go back to the fixed routes than to pass the financial burden of an unsustainable model on to customers for a couple more years.**

Decoupling from Fare Capping in RTS Monroe core service area

Riders we surveyed indicated the lack of fare capping will create a new cost burden, meaning they need to find money in their budget to absorb the increases for On Demand rides, or find alternatives.

According to the scenarios we ran, the proposed changes would result in a $1 per day increase in cost for City residents connecting to RTS On Demand in the zones. It additionally places increased financial burden on RTS On Demand riders who use the service more than twice a day. **We strongly recommend that a service-specific daily and monthly fare cap be established for On Demand service.**

We would appreciate seeing a breakout of numbers related to the quantity of riders this would impact:
- Number of riders that connect from RTS Connect to RTS On Demand at a connection hub per day
- Number of riders that connect from RTS On Demand to RTS Connect at a connection hub each day
- Number of riders with three or more RTS On Demand trips per day

As stated above, our comments are fueled by **a desire to provide reliable and quality transportation options for people who need to access the towns and suburbs of Monroe County, often our community's most vulnerable and underserved residents.** We feel the changes proposed are not a net improvement for riders and we hope RTS will seriously consider our suggested modifications and request for clarification. **We remain available to discuss these comments and we remain steadfast partners with RTS in our shared goal to provide excellent public transit to our community.**

Sincerely,

Bill Collins
Advocacy Committee Chair

Cody Donahue
Co-Executive Director

And…
Mary Staropoli, MPA, Co-Executive Director
Victor Sanchez, President
Renée Stetzer, Vice President
Jackie Marchand, Treasurer
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