

Updates to Mercer County TMA's ZLine Service

Background

In 2014, the ZLine was launched alongside the opening of the Amazon warehouse and fulfillment center in Mercer County in an effort to increase job access for some of Mercer County's poorest residents. The ZLine is a free shuttle service provided by the Greater Mercer Transportation Management Association (GMTMA) and Amazon that runs a 4.2-mile route between Hamilton Marketplace and the Matrix Business Park, bridging the gap between four bus lines and the business center, and connecting residents from Trenton, Hightstown, and East Windsor to job opportunities.

ZLine2 and Z3

The Zline's successful model prompted the creation of two additional ZLine routes: the ZLine2, which has been in operation since the fall of 2018, and Z3, which was a pilot service that ran for approximately 3 months in the fall of 2019. The Z3 was a pilot service that ran for just a little over 3 months in the fall of 2019 to an Amazon facility in Cranbury and the service was not continued after the pilot period. The ZLine2 serves an Amazon sort center facility in Robbinsville, and since fewer associates work at the sort center than the fulfillment center, the ZLine2 is operated with a van. When asked what the major lessons learned from this project were, Cheryl Kastrenakes, Executive Director of GMTMA, told us the following: "The route (ZLine2) was designed to be timed with meeting New Jersey Transit buses and synced to shift times. Although

it's not a one seat ride, having good connections and short wait times when commuting makes a huge difference. That holds true for the ZLine. Additionally, the ZLine was planned ahead of the facility opening. I think that planning for bus service ahead of time was and is important." Since inception, the ZLine and ZLine2 routes have a cumulative of 446,460 total rides through April 2020.

COVID 19 Impacts

As our transportation systems seek new ways to serve customers during the COVID19 pandemic, we inquired to see how the ZLine, which provides transportation to essential workers, has been impacted.

The ZLine service schedule has not changed since the onset of COVID19 related stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders, and protocols are in place for social distancing when riding the services. The driver is required to keep the vehicle at 50% capacity or less, and both drivers and passengers are required to wear facemasks. The ZLine has always experienced seasonal fluctuations in ridership levels: ridership numbers decrease after Amazon's peak period in November and December and then rises again in June. With that in mind, there has been a reduction in ridership from January-April, however, the reduction in ridership is much smaller for both services when compared to 2019. The 3.6% decrease in ridership that occurred in 2020 happened in the month of April. Although the source of this decrease is unknown at the time, it may be due to changes in home conditions, such as family members of Amazon facility employees

being home and having the capacity to drive these individuals to work, or could be due to a reduction in associates working at the facilities themselves. Nonetheless, the relatively steady ridership levels for the ZLine services amidst COVID19 highlights the importance of having public transit for essential workers.