

Kansas City Looks Back on its Long, Costly Ride With Microtransit

Since 2016, the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority has offered door-to-door trips from on-demand shuttles. Here's what the transit operator has learned.



In 2017, Kansas City Area Transportation Authority president and CEO Robbie Makinen launched RideKC Freedom, an earlier microtransit program. *Photographer: Keith Myers/Kansas City Star/Tribune News Service via Getty Images*

By [David Zipper](#)

December 5, 2024 at 5:00 AM PST

Few innovations in public transportation are trendier – or more controversial – than microtransit: on-demand shuttles that ferry passengers from origin to destination and cost little more than a bus fare.

For passengers, the appeal is clear. Who wouldn't leap at the chance to take a door-to-door trip that is far cheaper than hailing an Uber? Advocates claim microtransit can bring people to public transit who would never otherwise consider it, while critics question the scalability of a service that can require eye-watering subsidies.

Bloomberg CityLab

Vancouver Mayor Proposes Integrating Bitcoin Into City Finances

NYC's Run-Down Bus Terminal Gets Approval for \$10 Billion Revamp

In Traffic-Weary Toronto, a Battle Breaks Out Over Bike Lanes

Notre-Dame Reopens 'More Beautiful Than Before'

Few places have more microtransit experience than Kansas City, Missouri. In 2016, the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority became a pioneer when it partnered with Bridj, a now-defunct startup, to introduce on-demand shuttle trips. That experiment ended a year later, but it was quickly replaced by a similar app-based service called RideKC Freedom On Demand; now, Kansas Citians can request rides on IRIS, a microtransit program funded by local municipalities and managed by KCATA. Most IRIS fares are \$3. (Since 2020, regular bus service in Kansas City has been free.)

Meanwhile, public officials across the US and beyond continue jumping aboard the bandwagon: Microtransit has been deployed in big cities like Los Angeles as well as smaller ones like Sioux Falls, South Dakota. In some towns, such as Wilson, North Carolina, on-demand van service has replaced buses entirely.

CityLab contributor David Zipper spoke with KCATA CEO Frank White III to discuss how Kansas City's microtransit experience can inform the mobility decisions of public officials elsewhere. Their conversation has been edited for clarity and concision.

KCATA is one of the first transit agencies in the US to adopt microtransit. What spurred the agency's initial interest, and what were its goals?

When I came to the organization in 2016, our previous CEO had just done an agreement with Bridj. I think my predecessor was trying to push the envelope and really redefine what public transit was. With Bridj you could use an app to hail a ride, which made it kind of hip and sexy. To get to the crux of the matter, it wasn't a bus.

Bridj had challenges, particularly because we at KCATA couldn't get data from trips or control where vehicles would be deployed. Bridj left in 2017 and our current microtransit service, which is publicly managed, is called IRIS. Cities across the region contract with us to provide service.

I think the original hope was that if microtransit could be super innovative, it would make more people ride transit. But microtransit really isn't new. It's basically Dial-a Ride, which has been around for decades.

Can you explain the IRIS user experience?

You download the IRIS app, and then you use it to request a trip. One of the IRIS shuttles – there are a little more than 30 of them – will pick you up, although you may have to walk a few hundred feet to the pickup location.

You can request trips anywhere in Kansas City and also a few Missouri suburbs like Gladstone and Blue Springs, but IRIS doesn't go into the state of Kansas. The coverage area is divided into zones, and trips cost \$3 within a zone or \$4 if it's an adjacent zone, unless you're going to a transit hub, in which case it's free. A few destinations cost more, like the airport which is \$10.

Online, I've seen people complain about IRIS wait times that extend over an hour, or trip requests that are rejected outright. How long does it typically take to summon a vehicle?

You're not supposed to wait longer than 25 or 30 minutes, but it can be longer. That's a function of having limited operators and vehicles. Making those wait times briefer and more consistent would require a lot more resources.

How much is the average public subsidy for a fixed-route bus passenger trip versus an IRIS microtransit trip?

It's about \$2 for a fixed-route bus passenger and \$20 to \$25 for IRIS, so roughly ten times as much. Microtransit is hugely subsidized because it isn't really cost-efficient. You have a lot fewer passengers, but you're still paying someone to operate the vehicle, which is around 70% of variable costs.

Could someone take IRIS for a trip within downtown Kansas City, even though there's lots of fixed-route bus service there?

Yes. You're free to do so.

Why allow that? It seems inefficient and duplicative with full-sized buses.

That's based on a contract with the city. We're a contractor to the client.

To what extent does Kansas City's microtransit program improve upon fixed-route bus service?

It depends on where you are. In my opinion, the tradeoff in transit is always between frequency and coverage of service. If you're going to have frequent bus service in the core, then I don't think you should have microtransit there, because it's expensive to provide. No matter how well it works, it just can't move as many people as fixed-route bus service.

I joke that it's called "micro" for a reason, because it raises costs whenever you use it. So you want to be very intentional about how you deploy it. Microtransit can't be everywhere.

I wonder if microtransit is conceptually seductive because it implies residents can have their cake and eat it too: They can get the point-to-point, on-demand experience of ridehail for the low price of a bus ride.

Seductive is a great word. People assume that because it's a public service, you can get as much of it as you want. No, you can't. It doesn't work that way. There's only so much money.

Where can microtransit work best?

It works best in less dense areas. You could use it in rural areas where there is no fixed route service at all, or you could use it as a feeder system to nearby buses – but then the whole system has to be correlated, which can be challenging.

Microtransit might also be a useful way to gauge demand for future bus service. A goal of IRIS was to create demand for public transit service so that one day we could put fixed-route bus service there. If we look at a place like Platte County, a suburb to the north, and see a ton of microtransit activity, that tells us there may be potential for more fixed-route service down the line.

Have you created any new bus lines based on those kinds of microtransit insights?


No, not yet.

What do you wish people understood about operating microtransit?

People should understand that it's not necessarily more efficient than fixed-route bus trips – or even streetcar trips, for that matter.

Great cities have great transit. If people choose not to drive, they should be able to move around with some degree of freedom and flexibility. I think microtransit gives that to some degree, but it has to be tied to a system of fixed-route service.

Are there labor issues with microtransit?



Enter your email

By continuing, I agree to the [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#).

Sign Up

Yes. Our bus system is operated with union workers, but IRIS is done through a contractor that isn't unionized. IRIS operators have been paid less. Now there's a unionization effort underway among IRIS workers. I have no problem with that – it's their right, and I'm pro-labor. It'll be interesting to see what happens, because if they form a union, it could become more expensive to provide the service.

What does the future hold for microtransit in Kansas City?

I don't think we're going to have more microtransit service. Now that local officials have seen it in action, many are realizing that we can't afford to provide point-to-point transportation all across the region.

I think we'll see more strategic use of microtransit, focusing on less dense areas and connecting with our fixed-route buses. Maybe instead of taking microtransit from a suburb all the way to the airport, people can take microtransit to a bus line that will bring them to the airport. That kind of a feeder system is more efficient.

Do you think the excitement around microtransit will last?

I think there will be less hype about microtransit in the future. I expect more people will accept reality about what it can and can't do. In my opinion, we'll see a shift back toward buses because they just move more people – even if they're not as “cool” as microtransit.

The smart transit agencies are going to quit trying to be all things to all people. If they have microtransit, they'll say “this is where we will use it, and this is where we won't.” They're not going to put a square peg in a round hole.

The transit industry is so eager for acceptance and popularity. Instead of that, let's just do the best thing for our riders. Let's do what works. Sometimes the best innovation is just being on time.

[Share feedback](#) 