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# CITY OF TACOMA WAT FEASIBILITY PROJECT

## OBJECTIVE

To draft a feasibility study to explore the best model for Tacoma to operationalize a legally functioning, safe, accountable, reliable, and operational **Wheelchair Accessible Taxi\*** (WAT) system operating within the City of Tacoma by January of 2021. The timing of this study would parallel the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> year of the passage of the American with Disabilities Act and provide further impetus to find a viable way to provide an Accessible Taxi service in the City of Tacoma.

## BACKGROUND

The Tacoma Area Commission on Disabilities has been involved in efforts to establish an accessible Wheel Chair Accessible Taxi (WAT) option in the city of Tacoma for the past ten years. In association with other community partners, and advocates, Tacoma City Council approved a 10¢ fee on each **Transportation Network Company** (TNC, such as Uber and Lyft) fare that is paid into the Accessible Service Fund.

Other jurisdictions in Western Washington have initiated programs as early as 2007. These models often drew from significantly higher population centers and tax bases and have shown dramatic increases in daily ridership for people who use wheelchairs. While not making a direct comparison to the Tacoma model, these WAT programs provide evidence that these programs can significantly improve access for people with disabilities. The proposed feasibility study will explore the best model for Tacoma to establish its own WAT program and will take into consideration the unique circumstances that Tacoma must take into account in forming a reliable and sustainable WAT program for people who live, work and play in the City of Tacoma.

Pierce Transit, which provides limited Paratransit service, does not offer an on demand accessible taxi service and has not shown success in providing enough funding to initiate such a program. People with disabilities in Tacoma continue to need safe and reliable wheelchair accessible transportation service that can be accessed on demand, be available throughout the day and evening.

## CHALLENGES

Transportation Network Company fees have been collected in Tacoma since 2014. Existing taxi companies have struggled to remain viable, dependable and reliable as potential partners. These same companies have not responded affirmatively to expanding their services to include a WAT component.

The City of Tacoma has continued to grow its Accessible Service Fund at a modest rate annually. The fund now stands at approximately \$300,000 with additional funds arriving at the rate of \$70,000 - \$80,000 annually based on 700,000 to 800,000 total trips each year.

The City of Tacoma is exploring ways how to **leverage its existing funds** to build a viable WAT program. The Center for Independence, in affiliation with Cindi Laws, dba from Purple Mountain Advocates is proposing the completion of feasibility study to help the city determine the best way forward.

## PROPOSAL TO DEVELOP A WAT FEASIBILITY STUDY

A basic feasibility study will include the following elements:

- A draft timeline for implementation and service launch
- Brief research on WAT programs in other mid-size cities, including how they are funded and operated
- Create a series of budgets that clearly delineate one time funds from recurring revenues and demonstrate that the models are sustainable by having recurring revenues equal or greater than recurring expenses.  
Said budget shall include but not be limited to
  - An estimate of WAT Fund collections, categories of spending and sustainable levels
  - The cost of business of obtaining, retrofitting and operating a WAT
  - The cost of creating and operating a dispatch company or system
  - Ongoing training to prepare drivers on best practices to ensure access for riders with disabilities
  - Models that show varying levels of per ride subsidies.
- Draft an option for creating a nonprofit “centralized WAT dispatch”, rather than reliance upon taxi dispatch companies; including clearly showing one time startup costs and annual recurring costs.
- Exploring other existing dispatch systems that could be expanded to facilitate a WAT program
- Draft a list and budget targets for potential funding sources, to include both one-time grants or gifts, and ongoing support
- Connect with Pierce County to gauge interest in joining the project, including adding County funds
- Present sample City codes and rules establishing requirements for WAT owners, drivers, and vehicles, including training
- Present sample City rules to implement a subsidy structure to support WAT purchase, operations and trip subsidies, as well as compliance and reporting requirements
- Connect with existing wheelchair accessible vehicle providers in transit and for-hire industries to gauge interest in serving Tacoma as a WAT operator, and present findings
- Develop outline of agencies and organizations that would contract to use WAT services, including providing their own subsidies to sustain the service
- Recommend avenues for the WAT design to support minority and/or immigrant owned companies to reinforce the City of Tacoma’s equity priorities.

## COST

The cost of completing a feasibility report will be negotiated with the Center for Independence a nonprofit 501-c-3 organization acting as the fiscal administrator and Purple Mountain Advocates providing the service and will range between \$5,000 and \$10,000 depending upon the deliverables.

A contract will be drawn with dates for both deliverables and payments.

## DELIVERABLES

The consultant anticipates completing the feasibility study within a two month period and would generate a series of mutually agreed upon, clear deliverables, at the midway point of the project after the first thirty days and at the conclusion of the project.

## WHAT'S NEXT

Upon completion of the feasibility project, the Center for Independence and Purple Mountain Advocates welcome the opportunity to discuss next steps and explore a potential role the consultant might play in helping the city move the best option(s) forward.

## THE CONSULTANT

Cindi Laws, dba Purple Mountain Advocates, has served as a consultant, lobbyist, elected official, and activist on transportation matters for decades. She previously served as an aide to US Senator Brock Adams (himself the former US Secretary of Transportation), handling transportation and other issues, including the Americans with Disabilities Act. Laws has specifically represented the Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Association of Washington since 2015, working with state and local governments on the development and implementation of laws, codes, rules and procedures, including a goal of establishing statewide WAT regulatory standards and funding that will bring wheelchair accessible taxicab services throughout the State of Washington.

*\*Wheelchair Accessible Taxis are designed to meet the needs of people who use wheelchairs and people with other disabilities who are unable to access other forms of public transportation due to their disability such as people who are blind.*