

January/February 2021

Busline

Cover Feature

Post-Pandemic Focus: HOTARD COACHES Re-Evaluating/Coming Back Strong

New Orleans, LA



Buyers Guides

Vehicle Lifts
Disinfectants/Sanitizers
Seating/Fabrics

Syracuse, NY

'CUSE
TROLLEY



Rahmin Azria



Posing in front of a Hometown Trolley Streetcar model are, left to right, 'Cuse Trolley Transportation Supervisor Keith Phillips, Shuttle Bus Driver Rick Theisen and Associate Director of Transportation, Logistics and Financial Services Rahmin Azria.

'Cuse Trolley Handling On-Campus Transportation With Customer Service At The Heart Of The Operation

By Rick Mullen, *Busline Magazine* Associate Editor

A major difference between Syracuse University's 'Cuse Trolley and a traditional city-run transit agency has to do with who can ride the trolleys. Syracuse University's on-campus system only serves the school's students, faculty, staff and campus visitors.

As its name suggests, Syracuse University is located in Syracuse, NY, a city of approximately 143,000 people, according to 2020 population estimates. The city is in the northeast corner of the Finger Lakes region in the north-central part of the state.

Traditionally, Syracuse University's Parking and Transit Services has used several vendors for various operations, the largest of which is the Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (Centro), which services the campus, the city of Syracuse and surrounding areas.

"Centro handles the bulk of the transportation on campus," said Syracuse University Parking and Transit Services Associate Director of Transportation, Logistics & Financial Services Rahmin Azria, during a recent interview with *Busline Magazine*. "Several years ago, it was decided to use multiple vendors. About two years ago, after an extensive analysis, Parking and Transit Services decided to take on some of the transportation service in-house by launching 'Cuse Trolley. Now, we have our own vehicles. We had five trolley routes as of this past semester, and we have been slowly expanding. We will be running six or seven routes next semester. In addition, we have a para-transit route."

Among Syracuse University's Parking and Transit Services' responsibilities is coordinating transportation for the many events, both large and small, typical of a major university, including large sporting events.

College sports fans are well aware of the university's famous domed stadium called the Carrier Dome, which seats 49,250 fans, and is home to the Syracuse Orange football, basketball and lacrosse teams.

"In normal times, we manage the transportation of thousands of people, 'parking and riding' to the main campus for events in the Carrier Dome," Azria said. "We don't have enough parking on the main campus, which is the same story in a lot of different arenas across the country, so there is usually a park and ride component to large sporting events."

Currently, because of COVID-19, New York state is prohibiting fans from attending sporting events.

"Centro is a great partner. It has done a ton of work with us. However, because it is a regional transportation authority, Centro is limited in what it can do, which is why we use a lot of vendors," Azria said. "Because of state regulations regarding public transit agencies, Centro is not allowed to be a charter company. It just can't do random services, as that would be competing with for-profit companies.

"We still have a contract with Centro, and all of our students, faculty and staff can get on and off the transit agency's buses free by showing their university ID. It is a pretty seamless transportation experience."

Parking and Transit Services operates six transit vehicles and two passenger vans, Azria said.

"We operate two, 12-person (including a driver) passenger vans for

small trips and paratransit services,” Azria said. “We also operate four, 20-passenger Hometown Trolley Carriage model trolleys. We recently added two, 34-passenger Hometown Trolley Streetcar models.”

The larger Streetcar models were deemed necessary because of the expanded service needed due to restricted passenger limits on the trolleys caused by COVID-19.

“We wanted trolleys that could handle a little bit higher capacity,” Azria said. “We don’t necessarily have any plans etched in stone for the future, but we have experienced growth and a lot of demand for the services we are providing for the university, so there is a possibility we will continue to expand.”

Syracuse University has its own maintenance facility, which services the 300-plus vehicles the university owns, including the trolleys. ‘Cuse Trolley has proven to be very popular among students, faculty and staff riders.

“When our trolleys arrived, they received a warm welcome. Everyone loves them,” Azria said. “People like to just get on and ride. It is a very different experience from riding a regular transit bus.

“We have enjoyed a very good relationship with Hometown Trolley. We have been working with them for two years. The first vehicles arrived in December 2019. The trolley manufacturer has been very helpful with any issues that have arisen. We have had a really good experience working with Hometown Trolley.”

Indeed, the unique look and “fun” aspect of the trolleys have made them a rolling marketing tool for the system, said **Communications Manager Christine Weber**.

“The blue and orange (SU’s primary colors) trolleys catch your eye on the campus,” Weber said. “We work with a lot of different departments on campus to promote the trolleys. When they first arrived, I spoke with student organizations about the trolleys. A poster-style map will be placed around campus to help students understand better where the routes go. We are always partnering with different groups on campus to help us promote and educate students about the trolley system.”

Plans are in the works to introduce a new tracking system for ‘Cuse Trolley.

“The new tracking element will be another great feature we can put out there to catch students’ attention,” Weber said. “Like with Uber, riders want to know when their vehicle is arriving. That will be a great communication push for us for the spring semester.”

Because of delays caused by COVID-19, students are expected to return to campus for the spring semester in February.

“Tracking is a big deal for the students,” said **Transportation Supervisor Keith Phillips**. “It is an instant gratification world, so people want to know where their trolley is located and when it is going to arrive. They don’t want to have to look through pages of schedules — they want the information at their fingertips.

“We are developing a website where both ‘Cuse Trolley vehicles and Centro buses will be tracked on the same website. The icons on the site for Centro will look like buses. For ‘Cuse Trolley, the icons

will look like trolleys. When you click on a bus or a trolley icon, the entire route and a real-time predictive analysis of when the bus or trolley is going to arrive will be displayed.”

‘Cuse Trolley operates on two primary routes — the blue and orange loops — in and around the sprawling Syracuse University campus.

“Our campus is pretty large,” Azria said. “We also have service to a downtown location the university owns (Nancy Cantor Warehouse). There are a couple of other buildings along the way that we also own, including the Syracuse Stage, located on the outskirts of campus.”

All of the School of Design’s programs are housed in the seven-floor Nancy Cantor Warehouse. Syracuse Stage is a non-profit, professional theater company.

OPERATING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The city of Syracuse is the county seat of Onondaga County. As of January 7, the county reported 23,347 COVID-19 cases, resulting in 465 deaths. Statewide, a little more than 1 million cases, resulting in 38,486 deaths, have been logged, according to a *New York Times* database.

As is the case with many transportation providers nationwide, ‘Cuse Trolley and Centro have had to make adjustments to make sure riders and drivers are as safe as possible, while keeping the systems running during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such actions as requiring drivers and passengers to wear masks and adjusting service to allow for social distancing, among other efforts, have been implemented. Indeed, Syracuse University requires students, faculty and staff to wear masks at all times while on campus, except when isolated in individual offices.

“Centro and ‘Cuse Trolley put into place capacity restrictions on buses and trolleys — about 50 percent across the board — to reduce passenger density,” Azria said. **“If you reduce capacity, you must add more service, which is why we purchased the two additional Streetcar trolleys.**

“Centro worked with us and repositioned some routes. We made changes, moving service from lesser traveled areas to heavier demand routes. We worked closely with Centro to make sure we could handle peak times.

“In addition to reducing the number of people on the buses and trolleys, we added signage about the mask wearing mandate. We have placed hand sanitizers on trolleys and changed our cleaning protocols so the trolleys are cleaned more frequently.”

One development that helped in managing social distancing was the university’s addition of remote learning components, resulting in lower-than-normal ridership, Azria said.

Phillips added: “Since the pandemic hit, drivers have been the main cleaners. Every chance the drivers get, they wipe down pretty much everything. In addition, at least once a day, the trolleys are disinfected using an electrostatic sprayer.”

Drivers also participate in weekly COVID-19 surveillance testing, which is done on-campus, Weber said.



Shuttle Bus Driver Rick Theisen mans one of two Hometown Trolley Streetcars ‘Cuse Trolley has in service. ‘Cuse Trolley also operates four Carriage models from Hometown Trolley.



“We recently brought our surveillance testing in-house. We have our own lab on campus that processes the saliva-based tests,” Weber said.

Surveillance testing is designed to monitor the current state of the pandemic by providing insight into the spread of the virus among certain geographic areas or groups of people.

In addition to making sure passengers have space to practice social distancing on trolleys, keeping drivers as isolated as possible is also a concern.

“In the Carriage trolleys, drivers sit three feet forward from the door, and there is a barrier behind them,” Phillips said. “They don’t come in close contact with passengers. The first seat that a passenger can sit in is six feet from the driver.

“There are two doors in the newly acquired Streetcars, one near the front of the trolley and one near the rear. We are going to look at putting barriers in place in the front of the trolley to protect drivers. Another option is to only use the back door to enter and exit the bus.”

In discussing any long-term ramifications of the pandemic, Phillips said he foresees the 'Cuse Trolley service will continue to expand as students, faculty and staff often prefer riding the trolleys, as opposed to the Centro service, where ridership includes the general public.

“Trolley riders are going to be more comfortable, knowing that the university is controlling the cleaning of vehicles, the testing for our drivers, etc.,” Phillips said. “There is nothing wrong with Centro. Centro is taking all the precautions we are, but it is important to 'Cuse Trolley riders that the trolleys are limited to Syracuse University faculty, staff and students.”

More frequent cleaning and disinfecting of the trolleys is also going to be an effort that will continue when the pandemic subsides.

“The cleaning is going to carry over (after the pandemic subsides), just because it is a way to better care for the trolleys,” Phillips said. “As the transportation supervisor, I can tell you we are going to continue enhanced cleaning and taking the best possible care of our trolleys.”

Azria predicted the effects of the pandemic, even with people getting vaccinated, will continue to be felt for a year, or maybe two.

“Ultimately, mass transit is a necessity and is going to continue to grow over time, as it has been,” Azria said. “I think we are going to see

the adoption of more remote learning and remote work, which is going to impact ridership numbers, but there is always going to be a need for mass transit. People will eventually feel comfortable riding the bus again. It might take a year or two, but I’m hopeful we will be able to go back to what life was like before COVID-19.”

Azria also pointed out there is uncertainty surrounding what direction higher education might take. What will be the ratio of online versus on-campus attendance and how will that affect ridership?

“Whether or not online learning will have a long-term impact on mass transit is to be determined,” Azria said.

While COVID-19 is currently the biggest issue in the country when it comes to keeping people healthy and safe, there remain other emergencies public transit agencies must be prepared to handle. For example, in recent years, the specter of random gun violence erupting in public places is one that has plagued the country.

In case of an emergency involving ridership safety, 'Cuse Trolley has procedures in place to coordinate an appropriate response with local law enforcement and the Syracuse University Department of Public Safety.

According to safetydivision.syr.edu, Syracuse University Department of Public Safety has more than 200 employees. Police academy-trained officers, sworn campus peace officers and non-sworn community service officers provide proactive services through vehicular, bicycle and foot patrols. The department also consists of non-sworn residential community safety officers, located at the entrances of all residential facilities. The department also includes the office of Emergency Management and Business Continuity planning.

“We work very closely with the Syracuse University Department of Public Safety. 'Cuse Trolley is actually in the same university division,” Azria said. “We all report to Campus Safety and Emergency Services, which has access to our cameras.”

The Department of Public Safety has its own emergency communications center on campus.

“Basically, we have our own little mini-911 center connected to our county’s 911 system,” Weber said. “We all work closely together and conduct a lot of training. In the event of an emergency, we can send alert texts, emails, etc. If something is going down, everyone on campus will be made aware of what is happening.”

CUSTOMER SERVICE AT THE HEART OF 'CUSE TROLLEY'S MISSION

Looking past all the challenges, confusion and fear brought about by the societal and economic upheavals due to COVID-19, at the end of the day, offering the best in customer service remains at the heart of what 'Cuse Trolley is about.

"We are here to serve our faculty, staff and students, and we go above and beyond in doing that," Phillips said. "For example, 'Cuse Trolley doesn't necessarily go everywhere on South Campus, but **if a student were to say, 'I don't feel safe walking from the bus stop to my apartment,' we will take that person right to his/her home. We are here to serve. My cell phone number is published on our website.** So, if anybody has any problems or needs specific to transportation, they can call me directly."

According to *syracuse.edu*, about 2,300 Syracuse upperclassmen live in South Campus, located about one mile south of the main campus. The area is comprised of apartment complexes, arranged in several neighborhoods.

To make sure the system's customer service standards are upheld, 'Cuse Trolley has a highly motivated, experienced staff of transportation professionals.

Some employees were gleaned from vendors used before Parking and Transit Services launched 'Cuse Trolley as an in-house service.

"Those seasoned employees are well-versed in customer service and they uphold the philosophy that we go the extra mile and do what we can for the faculty, staff and students," Phillips said.

"We strive to hire people who are genuinely happy and helpful, and who want to work and interact with our campus community," Azria said. "It is all about customer service. As Keith (Phillips) said, we go out of our way to help people, even if it means going the extra mile, literally."

Hiring qualified drivers to service the riding public has traditionally been a thorn in the side of many transportation agencies nationwide.

"Generally speaking, there is a shortage of CDL drivers in the country," Azria said. "In addition to having a CDL and the proper endorsements, there is training that is required for drivers. All of that makes it difficult to find the right people who fit in well. Furthermore, sometimes we just don't get many applicants."

"We require driver applicants to have at least three years prior experience," Phillips said. "Our campus has a lot of pedestrian traffic, so we are not looking for people who are new to driving. Once they are hired, we conduct ongoing training for drivers.

"We have a 19-A examiner on staff. 19-A is part of New York State vehicle and traffic regulations. It goes a little beyond federal DOT requirements. The state examines our files. It requires our 19-A examiner to conduct defensive driving training at least once a year. There are also written tests involved. Drivers must take an exam every two years.

"In addition, the state makes sure we have physicals for all the drivers. New York State keeps a tight leash on bus operators."

Another important campus operation is its paratransit service, called Access 'Cuse.

According to *parking.syr.edu*, Access 'Cuse is a point-to-point transit service designed to assist individuals with chronic health, sensory and permanent mobility disabilities navigate the university campus.

"Currently, we are running Access 'Cuse internally," Azria said. "We used a vendor during the academic year to provide extra service. We put the paratransit service in place about three years ago."



PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION RECOMMENDED AS A REWARDING CAREER PATH

Both Azria and Phillips said they would recommend public transportation as an enjoyable and rewarding career path. Phillips said one viable jumping-off point for those seeking a career in the industry would be to seek out schools that offer a mass transportation curriculum.

However, there are other entry points, such as working one's way up the ladder at a public transportation entity — a path Phillips traveled all the way into management.

"I started as a bus cleaner," Phillips said. "The company I worked for helped me get my CDL license. I drove motorcoaches for many years before getting into management. It has been extremely fun. I have gotten to travel to a lot different places. Public transportation is a great career path."

Azria said he sort of "fell into" working as a transportation professional. "I definitely recommend public transportation as a career, although it is not something that most people think of when they are looking at what they want to be when they grow up," Azria said. "I have been in parking and transportation for more than 20 years. It has been fulfilling work. Choosing to make the industry a career has been a good decision on my part."

Contact: Syracuse University Parking and Transit,
621 Skytop Road, No. 190, Syracuse, NY 13210.

Phone: 315-443-4652.

Website: parking.syr.edu.