The ability to use public and private transportation is something most people take for granted, but not Gilda Chico. Ms Chico is blind and has difficulty walking, and San Francisco’s fixed route transit services, such as Muni and Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), often do not meet her needs. Fortunately, she is eligible to use San Francisco Paratransit (SF Paratransit), and she is very grateful: “Paratransit service opened up the world for me and it covers my entire life. It allows access to the whole city. I can go shopping for my mother, go to church, and have a social life. Before paratransit service started, getting around was hard. I had to always depend on other people to give me a ride. Now I have the freedom to zip around the city.”

Since the passage of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, all public transit agencies are required to provide paratransit services, usually consisting of a combination of vans and taxis for people unable to independently use public transit some or all of the time because of a disability or disabling health condition. San Francisco Paratransit, operated by the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA), has been around for more than 30 years, and was born out of a community push to provide the service. According to Kate Toran, Paratransit Manager for SFMTA, the program has been able to support the growth in demand for service while managing costs. In 2009, SF Paratransit provided more than 1.1 million paratransit trips to approximately 14,000 registered riders.

Proposition K, the half-cent sales tax for transportation administered by the San Francisco County Transportation Authority (SFCTA), funds $9.7 million annually for paratransit operations, the only operations category in the entire Proposition K program. This funding comprises approximately 45% of the operational costs, with the remainder coming from SFMTA, BART, and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funds in addition to user fares. (Paratransit users pay the same fare as cash-paying Muni riders for van service, and a reduced rate for taxi services.)

Providing paratransit service is different than operating fixed route service. Vehicles provide curb-to-curb service, requiring scheduling and dispatch operations that are not normally found within transit agencies. For this reason, the provision of paratransit services has been brokered by SFMTA to a private company from the program’s onset. The SF Paratransit Broker manages the day-to-day paratransit program and subcontracts with the a complex network of service providers, including van and taxi companies. This structure ensures that the private entities meet or exceed the
program’s requirements within the cost constraints of the revenue sources.

Approximately 50% of all paratransit trips are taken by taxis which are specially equipped for users with disabilities, including wheelchair ramps. Paratransit customers pay $5 for $30 worth of taxi services; the total monthly allotment is determined for each individual depending on his or her eligibility and transportation needs. Before 2009, paratransit riders paid for taxis with paper scrip, which was difficult and cumbersome to manage for SFMTA, drivers, and riders, particularly for many sight-impaired passengers. In 2009, SF Paratransit implemented the Paratransit Debit Card System (PDCS), installing swipe readers, smart meters, mobile data terminals and GPS units compatible with taxi companies’ credit card systems. The program then issued magnetic-swipe debit cards to all paratransit customers for identification and electronic payment. This new technology addressed numerous issues at once, including: eliminating the paper system, automating the fare payment process, electronically monitoring service, and reducing the opportunity for fraud, all of which contribute to managing costs. Ms. Chico finds that using the paratransit taxi service is much easier with the debit card system. “The paper was hard for blind people to count. Now, I don’t have to handle anything and my account is easier to track.”

SF Paratransit’s strong service, along with San Francisco’s high density and relatively small geographic area, has created an effective program that costs about half as much to run per trip as programs in comparable cities. The implementation of the PDCS, and the associated reduction in administration and fraud, contributed to the program being $2 million under budget for Fiscal Year 2009-10. The operations cost savings, which will help to offset the expected increase in use of paratransit by the aging San Francisco population, are significant since SFMTA, like transit operators nationwide, has experienced significant declines in operating revenue. The PDCS was a particularly cost effective project, with capital investments totaling less than $5 million. The project was funded by several sources, including Prop K (6% of total capital cost), FTA funds, regional bridge tolls, and the San Francisco Municipal Railway Improvement Corporation (SFMRIC).

Outside of taxi services, the other 50% of paratransit trips are served through pre-scheduled ADA-compliant van services and coordinated group van services. SFMTA also recently opened an innovative shuttle service for residents of low income neighborhoods who have limited grocery shopping opportunities, including passengers who may not meet ADA eligibility standards for paratransit service. The shopping shuttle is partially funded by a $1.5 million Lifeline Transportation Program grant, which is programmed by SFCTA.

While technology has helped to enhance San Francisco Paratransit, for Ms. Chico it’s the human touch that adds the most value. For the past ten years, she has been a regular rider with Fred Lein, a ramped-taxi driver for Yellow Cab. Sitting together...
with Mr. Lein in her living room, Ms. Chico says that during her first ride, “he made a personal commitment to me.” Although paratransit taxi drivers are only required to provide curb-to-curb service, “Fred takes me from door-to-door and lobby-to-lobby. He also allows people to call his cell phone during the day, which he’s not required to do.” In order to ensure that sensitivity to users’ needs is not the exception to the rule, drivers wishing to operate wheelchair accessible ramp taxis must go through an interview with a subcommittee of the Paratransit Coordinating Council (PCC), a 38-member committee comprised of van and taxi consumers, representatives of agencies serving seniors and individuals with disabilities, transportation providers and government entity representatives. (Both Ms. Chico and Mr. Lein are members of the PCC and serve on subcommittees.)

Ms. Chico’s experience with San Francisco paratransit has motivated her to recommend the service to other blind people. “[Many blind persons] are afraid to use the service and they continue to rely on family and friends for transportation. I encourage them to use the taxis and go outside their comfort zone.”

Project At A Glance

SF Paratransit, operated by the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA), has been around for more than 30 years (longer than ADA), and was born out of a community push to provide the service. In 2009, SF Paratransit provided more than 1.1 million paratransit trips to approximately 14,000 registered riders. That same year, SF Paratransit implemented the Paratransit Debit Card System (PDCS), installing swipe readers, smart meters, mobile data terminals and GPS units compatible with credit card systems. The program then issued magnetic-swipe debit cards to all paratransit customers for identification and electronic payment. This new technology addressed numerous issues at once, including: eliminating the paper system, automating the fare payment process, electronically tracking users’ accounts, and reducing the opportunity for fraud.

SF Paratransit’s strong and innovative service, along with San Francisco’s high density and relatively small geographic area, has created an effective program that costs about half as much to run per trip as comparable cities. In Fiscal Year 2009-10, due in part to the PDCS, the operating program was $2 million under budget.

In addition to partially funding the SF Paratransit program through Proposition K, SFCTA has also programmed funding for the new Bayview shopping shuttle through the Lifeline Transportation Program.

Funding

Operations (09/10)

- Prop K: $9.7M (46%)*
- SFMTA (Muni) Operating Budget: $5.0M (24%)
- BART ADA: $1.4M (7%)
- FTA: $3.9M (18%)
- Other: $1.0M (5%)

Capital Costs for PDCS

- Prop K Sales Tax: $250k (6%)
- Bridge Tolls: $750k (19%)
- FTA Funds: $3M (75%)

*The SF Paratransit program is the only operations category in the Prop K Program

While technology has helped to enhance San Francisco Paratransit, customers often say it’s the human touch that adds the most value.