

Phone app debuts free door-to-door transit for stops in New London



BY CATE HEWITT - DECEMBER 17, 2021

NEW LONDON — The new [NL SmartRide](#) app worked well on Friday afternoon when CT Examiner booked a ride from Bank St. to the Shain Library at Connecticut College. It took about 5 minutes for the minibuss to show up after the ride was confirmed and about 10 minutes to reach the destination.

As an experiment, Mayor Mike Passero booked a ride from City Hall to the Shain Library at the same time as CT Examiner. The idea was to see who would get to the library first and whether the app's algorithm would instruct a driver to pick up parties with identical destinations.

As it happened, Passero arrived at the library first, without CT Examiner, and that was because he confirmed his ride and was quickly en route before CT Examiner confirmed her ride. When Passero booked a ride back to City Hall, the system's algorithm alerted CT Examiner's bus as it arrived at the library — which is how the Passero and CT Examiner returned downtown on the same minibuss.

"It's as easy as Uber. I mean, with Uber sometimes you'd wait," Passero told CT Examiner on the ride back to City Hall.

The new on-demand, "micro-transit" shuttle started Dec. 6. Riders download a free smartphone app called Spare Rider to schedule curb-to-curb service within the city of New London. Depending on who else is requesting a ride, the minibusses, which are ADA-compliant, may pick up other passengers along the way.

Once a ride is requested, the Spare Rider app provides the estimated pick-up time, tracks the bus in real time and alerts the passenger when the ride is about to arrive at pick-up location. The app also notifies the passenger when the shuttle is about to arrive at the destination. Customers without smartphones can request same-day rides by calling 860-934-5234. Further information is available at www.parkinnewlondon.com.



New London Mayor Mike Passero rode NL SmartRide buses to and from Conn. College on Friday afternoon.



Rides are available from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Two buses are running between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m., and, for now, one bus covers the city between 3 p.m. and 8 p.m.

"We've been having a hard time getting drivers," Passero said. "We'd have three buses if we can get the drivers."

According to one bus driver, some riders have asked whether the service could be extended to Walmart and Stop and Shop, which are outside of New London .

"It's a pilot and if it's successful, we can look into expanding the area that we cover," Passero said.

Passero said he envisioned city dwellers using the service in the summer to travel to Ocean Beach and leaving their cars at home.

“If you live in the new apartments downtown, you don’t have to bother with your car. You could just hop on the bus, save on the parking fee at the beach and use a pedestrian beach pass,” he said. He said he hoped the first expansion of the service will be to add hours on Friday and Saturday nights for the restaurant and entertainment crowd.

“And, some people are already using it to commute to work,” he said.



One bus driver told Passero she’s had the same people on the bus every evening since the service started.

“We’re such a small city, you’re probably going to get to know everyone,” Passero laughed.

The pilot program is a partnership among New London Parking Authority, Southeast Area Transit, and Spare, a micro-transit app company based in Vancouver, Canada.

The service will be free during the pilot program from Dec. 6, 2021, through May 8, 2022. If the pilot is deemed a success, the service will expand and become part of the New London Parking Authority’s regular service. After the pilot, the cost to ride will be \$1.75 per trip. A discounted fare of \$0.85 will be available for seniors, students and people with disabilities and proper identification

The idea was to bring affordable public door-to-door transportation to the city, said Carey E. Redd, director of parking and CEO for the New London Parking Authority, in a release.

“That’s our goal... whether that destination is The Garde, employment, appointments, shopping, dining, or to New London’s Transportation Hub from which they can travel on to Foxwoods, Mohegan Sun, or other locales in New England, New York, or Boston by bus, ferry or train.”

Jeanne and Steve Siegel, owners of The Garde, have been using the service to commute to and from work since the program started.

“It’s a way for people to visit their own city because now you don’t have to park with the [GPS] telling you what to do. You can just visit anybody, a friend, or you can go downtown, it’s great,” said Steve Siegel. “Or, if you’re eating at a restaurant before a show, you can park anywhere and take a bus to a show, you don’t have to park next to The Garde anymore.”