



COMMISSION MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Commission

FROM: Eric Carpenter, City Manager

DATE: March 19, 2025

TITLE: DISCUSS AND TAKE ACTION ON ENHANCING PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ACCESSIBILITY AND EFFICIENCY AT SENIOR CENTERS WITH A DEDICATED MID-SIZE BUS SERVICE.

RECOMMENDATION

The City Administration ("Administration") recommends that the Mayor and City Commission ("City Commission") discuss and provide direction on the potential implementation, including desired service parameters and funding considerations, of an accessible and efficient transportation service for residents living in senior centers.

BACKGROUND/HISTORY

At the June 26, 2024 City Commission meeting, at the request of Mayor Steven Meiner ("Mayor Meiner"), the City Commission referred an item (C4 AR) to the Public Safety and Neighborhood Quality of Life Committee ("PSNQLC" or "Committee") to discuss enhancing public transportation accessibility and efficiency at senior centers with a dedicated mid-size bus service.

On November 16, 2020, the City of Miami Beach ("City") launched the Freebee On-Demand Transit Service for Seniors ("Freebee Senior Service"). The Freebee Senior Service provides a free shuttle service for senior residents (65 and older) living in affordable housing facilities throughout the City and/or participating in any of the senior programs provided by UNIDAD, Jewish Community Services or Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Center. The Freebee Senior Service is currently provided to/from approximately 40 senior facilities located in South Beach, Middle Beach, and North Beach and the closest Publix supermarket or pharmacy. The Freebee Senior Service operates seven (7) days a week, from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., with two (2) Gem e6 golf-type electric vehicles (Attachment A). Senior residents are required to register with Freebee in advance to enroll in the service.

Since the inception of the Freebee Senior Service, the ridership data has consistently indicated that the majority (approximately 65%) of all requests citywide originate from Rebecca Towers residents. This statistic highlights the high demand for transportation services to/from this facility. To address this high demand effectively, Mayor Meiner's proposal includes exploring the implementation of a dedicated mid-size bus service, equipped with the latest platforms to accommodate the mobility aids and necessities of senior residents.

It is worth noting that the Administration is currently in concurrent negotiations with three (3) selected vendors for the implementation of a Citywide Municipal Transit Circulator Service to replace the current Miami Beach Trolley service which has been in operation since 2014. While all our current trolley vehicles in service (low-floor and high-floor) meet the Americans with Disabilities Act ("ADA") requirements, including being equipped with electric wheelchair lifts, kneeling capabilities, and ADA ramps, the high-floor vehicles used for the Mid-Beach and North Beach loops are particularly inconvenient for senior passengers with mobility challenges and/or small carts due to the various steps required to board and disembark the vehicles. The forthcoming Citywide Municipal Transit Circulator Service is intended to provide a world-class,

reliable, eco-friendly, and customer-friendly service utilizing “next generation” low-floor transit vehicles that are more convenient for passengers, particularly our senior residents, to board and disembark.

In addition to the Freebee Senior Service and Citywide Free Trolleys, the Senior Enhanced Transit Services ("SETS") program (Attachment B) has been a valuable resource for senior residents since its inception in 2007. The SETS program, managed by the Parks and Recreation Department, operates with an annual budget of \$50,000 and provides transportation for seniors aged 65 and older. The program focuses on connecting seniors to community organizations and offering opportunities for recreational outings, such as trips to local theaters, parks, museums, movies, and other cultural events. Its primary intent is to encourage healthy, active lifestyles that enhance the quality of life for senior residents.

SETS Program Highlights and Impact

- Type of Vehicle: Transportation is consistently provided using a school bus contracted through Franmar Corporation. The buses, typically Bluebird models with a 44-passenger capacity, ensure adequate seating and comfortable travel for participants.
- Events and participation in Fiscal Year (“FY”)2024:
 - A total of 24 events were organized in FY2024, ranging from recreational trips to cultural outings and special gatherings.
 - The program engaged an estimated 3,500 attendees across these events, demonstrating its broad reach and significant impact on the community.
 - Notable events include the Senior Prom in July 2024, attended by 500 seniors, and the Senior Holiday Gala in January 2024, which saw 400 attendees. Smaller outings, such as trips to Adrienne Arsht Center, Botanical Gardens, and health fairs, typically accommodated between 30 and 90 participants.

Based on recent conversations with the Parks and Recreation Department staff, there is a lack the resources to expand the SETS program to include trips for essential needs such as grocery shopping. Additionally, the type of vehicles currently used for the SETS program (e.g. school buses) are not ADA-compliant vehicles. For example, the buses lack ramps and other accessibility features required for seniors with mobility aids or grocery carts, which further limits their usability for this purpose.

At the November 13, 2024 PSNQLC meeting, the Committee discussed this item and recommended to continue working with the Mayor's Office to provide further input and refine a plan to enhance public transportation accessibility for senior residents through a dedicated midsize bus service. Pursuant to the Committee's recommendation, the Transportation and Mobility Department staff met with the Mayor's Office to identify the key parameters for the development of such transportation service and next steps.

At the January 29, 2025 PSNQLC meeting, the Committee moved the item, without a recommendation, to the City Commission for further discussion.

ANALYSIS

While Parks and Recreation Department staff has expressed that it is unable to expand the SETS program at this time due to limited resources, the SETS model offers a viable framework for creating a similar pre-scheduled service potentially utilizing the City's current contracts with public transit providers (i.e. Limousines of South Florida ("LSF") and Freebee) to meet the additional transportation needs of senior residents. Under this concept, senior centers could submit a request form specifying their residents' transportation needs, such as the number of passengers, destination(s), and preferred schedule. These requests would be reviewed and approved by City staff in advance, ensuring efficient coordination with the senior centers and their residents. The new program could focus on providing safe and accessible transit vehicles equipped with ramps

and ample space for groceries or other personal items, such as carts, catering to the unique needs of seniors.

However, it is important to note that the Transportation and Mobility Department does not currently have the resources to manage such a program. The successful implementation of this potential additional pre-scheduled transit service for seniors would require dedicated personnel to process ride requests, coordinate schedules with the senior centers, and accompany seniors on each trip to provide assistance as needed. Additionally, the City's current contract with LSF and Freebee do not include personnel to fulfill these responsibilities.

Given these constraints, the Administration seeks input from the Commission to evaluate potential pathways for addressing the additional transportation needs of senior residents. Feedback on service design, resource allocation, and implementation strategies will help determine whether a new senior transportation program modeled after SETS can be effectively pursued.

To ensure any proposed solution effectively addresses senior residents' needs, the Administration plans to survey major senior housing facilities in the City, such as Rebecca Towers, Stella Maris, Four Freedoms, and Council Towers. Feedback from these communities will provide valuable insights to guide the planning and implementation of a new or adapted on-demand transit service for senior residents.

FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

The Administration recommends that while the City Commission evaluates a transportation resource for seniors, it also carefully considers several critical factors that will significantly impact the General Fund budget, beginning in FY 2026:

1. The City's increasing unfunded capital improvement program;
2. Long-term General Fund financial projections indicating a potential shortfall in upcoming fiscal years;
3. The recent notification of a \$5-6 million annual budget impact on the General Fund due to the new 2% collection fee imposed by the Miami-Dade Tax Collector; and
4. The passage of Amendment 5 in November 2024, which increases the homestead exemption and further constrains the growth of taxable property values.

Funding for this service has not been identified, budgeted, or appropriated in the FY 2024/25 Transportation and Mobility Department Operating Budget. The considerations outlined above are essential to ensure that decisions regarding this potential transportation resource align with the City's broader long-term financial stability and strategic priorities. If the City Commission recommends funding this program, the Administration recommends it be considered as part of the FY 2026 budget process.

Does this Ordinance require a Business Impact Estimate?

(FOR ORDINANCES ONLY)

If applicable, the Business Impact Estimate (BIE) was published on:

See BIE at: <https://www.miamibeachfl.gov/city-hall/city-clerk/meeting-notice/>

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

CONCLUSION

The SETS program, managed by the Parks and Recreation Department, has been a reliable resource for senior residents since 2007, fostering active lifestyles through recreational outings. However, its current scope and reliance on school buses without accessibility features limit its ability to address essential needs, such as trips to/from grocery stores. Additionally, the Parks and Recreation Department staff has indicated that it does not currently have the resources necessary to expand the SETS program for this purpose.

While expanding the existing SETS program is not feasible, the Administration sees potential in developing a new pre-scheduled service modeled after SETS to transport residents living in senior centers to/from grocery store(s). This potential program could allow senior centers to submit ride requests for essential trips, such as grocery shopping, using accessible, ADA-compliant transit vehicles. However, implementing such a program would require additional resources, including dedicated personnel to assist with coordinating and managing requests with the senior centers and accompanying seniors during the trips, which are not currently within the capacity of the Parks and Recreation or Transportation and Mobility departments, or its current contractors for senior transportation services.

To ensure any proposed solution effectively addresses senior residents' needs, the Administration plans to survey major senior housing facilities in the City, such as Rebecca Towers, Stella Maris, Four Freedoms, and Council Towers. Feedback from these communities will provide valuable insights to guide the planning and implementation of a new or adapted pre-scheduled transit service for senior residents.

This item is presented to the City Commission for discussion and direction.

Applicable Area

Citywide

Is this a "Residents Right to Know" item, pursuant to City Code Section 2-17?

No

Is this item related to a G.O. Bond Project?

No

Was this Agenda Item initially requested by a lobbyist which, as defined in Code Sec. 2-481, includes a principal engaged in lobbying? No

If so, specify the name of lobbyist(s) and principal(s):

Department

Transportation and Mobility

Sponsor(s)

Mayor Steven Meiner

Co-sponsor(s)

Commissioner Laura Dominguez
Commissioner Kristen Rosen Gonzalez

Condensed Title

Discuss/Action, Enhance Public Transp at Sr Centers Mid-Size Bus Svc. (SM/LD/KRG) TR

Previous Action (For City Clerk Use Only)