

Transcript for South Sound Connected Ep. 36: Signs, Signs, Everywhere (Accessible) Signs

Penny

Hello everyone and welcome to episode 36. My name is Penny Grellier and I appreciate you tuning in. Today on South Sound connected, we're going to talk with Ausha Potts, Pierce Transit's ADA Eligibility Assistant Manager and Amin "Tony" Hester, Vice Chair of Pierce Transit's Community Transportation Advisory Group, about an exciting pilot project Pierce Transit has recently launched in the community to help more members of the public successfully navigate our system. So welcome, Ausha and Tony.

Tony

Thank you for having me.

Penny

So can you each tell our listeners a little bit about your roles with Pierce Transit and in the community at large?

Ausha

Hello, my name is Ausha Potts and I'm the ADA Eligibility Assistant Manager in the Specialized Transportation department. I oversee the ADA shuttle eligibility process and the travel training program for individuals with disabilities and seniors who want to learn how to use the fixed route bus system independently. I also engage closely with community partners and riders with disabilities by engaging in work group meetings, committees and outreach events to ensure that services are accessible to our customers with disabilities.

Penny

And Tony?

Tony

My name is Amin Tony Hester. I go by Tony. I am the Vice Chair of the Community Transportation Advisory Group here at Pierce Transit. Also, a systemic advocate for the Center for Independence, as well as a member of the Pierce County Accessible Advisory Committee and the Tacoma Area Commission on Disabilities, which I am the current Chair. I do a lot of disability advocacy in the community and working with Pierce Transit on their ADA stuff is another kind of hat that I wear.

Penny

Nice. Thank you both. I will let you, Ausha, tell our listeners about the new signage that's being piloted at our Commerce Street station in downtown Tacoma. Can you describe the project and kind of talk about how it came to be?

Ausha

This is a project that I am very passionate about. As I mentioned, you know, I do participate in work group meetings along with the ADA eligibility and Travel training staff and in meetings we often focus on access and functional needs of customers with disabilities. So back in 2023, two members of our specialized transportation team presented to the Pierce County Association of the Blind, where several members of that support group expressed difficulties with being able to navigate our bus system independently. They also expressed that they were unable to differentiate between a bus stop and a regular street pole. And we brought that feedback back to our staff here at Pierce Transit and we got together and we tried to figure out is there a way that we can assist our riders with vision loss in a way that they can be able to navigate our system. And be able to differentiate a bus stop pole versus a street pole and we brought that feedback back to our staff here at Pierce Transit in our Planning department as they were already looking into improvements with our bus stops. At the same time, one of our CTAG members Tony (who is here with us today) had also had some concerns in regards to being able to access our bus system and express that there were some issues with our bus stops. And with the support from Ryan Wheaton, our Chief Planning Officer, we were able to form an accessible bus stop signage workgroup committee and initiate the pilot project.

Penny

Tony, I think it would be helpful for our listeners to understand why the new type of signage is needed. What challenges do members of the blind, low vision and deafblind community face when it comes to accessing transit? And how does this new kind of signage help?

Tony

Well, it's a big help because when you're walking as a low vision blind or even that blind individual, a lot of the times you don't actually know what the bus stop signs say, or even what's on your end, or what buses might come. There you have to do some planning ahead of time. That may lead you there, but if something happens and you get turned around or you're not quite sure. You're unable to read those signs. You have to kind of resort to either asking somebody and then depending on them, to tell you the right of correct information or going into a store or something like that and then still trying to get the information. And imagine how it would be if you're deafblind and no one can communicate with you the proper way so this helps us with those type of challenges and obstacles to navigate more independently. I still have to pre-plan things, but if I'm at a bus stop downtown, per say, I know what's at that bus stop. Don't know what route I can catch here. I don't know the number to call. I need to. Pretty confident of where I am but in other situations, you're not as confident. And maybe you might not even be at the right stop and not know it. So, I mean, there's still other things that we can do to make things a little bit better, but this is I think a great start in the right direction. So I'm happy to see it come to fruition finally, after a long time and I'm appreciative of it and I think a lot of people will be as well.

Penny

So, Ausha, what do these new signs feature and how are they different from typical signage?

Ausha

Yeah. So something that we really wanted to focus on is being inclusive with our signage. We did a lot of research before coming up with our pilot project signs and what we found was at a lot of the different agencies nationwide, their signs were very basic. And so we really wanted to focus on ensuring that our

signs had very detailed information. So all of our signs do include grade two Braille. They all have tactile raised lettering. They have the bus stop ID number, the zone location and our bus routes or routes served at each stop. The type of service that is provided, for example, if there's obviously a bus stop, or if it's being serviced by our Runner or SHUTTLE, and our Pierce Transit main phone number. So that way if a person is needing assistance, they are able to call into our main phone number and get that assistance that is available.

Penny

So this next question is for both of you, something that I've talked about on many other episodes of this podcast is that it often takes a team to get projects and programs off the ground. So how did teamwork support this accessible signage project?

Tony

I think it was overall a team effort. It was a collaboration. When I first started thinking about this, I actually was in a meeting with at the time County Councilmembers Ryan Mello and Janie Hitchens at the Accessible Community Advisory Committee meeting when I was actually chair and I have been thinking about it for a while. And I kind of introduced the idea to those guys; understandably, at the time, I didn't realize that Councilmember Mello was on the board for Pierce Transit. And at the time I was being kinda looked at to be the Co-chair for the CTAG. So it kind of worked. So where the collaboration began, and then talking to Ryan, we brought things together. Then Ausha was part of that team where we went downtown and we looked at the bus signs and kind of got a little preliminary information and from there it was just a collaboration between myself, Pierce Transit and other stakeholders on making this possible. And Ausha was kind of the spearhead for everything. Without her and her diligence, I don't think this thing would have come together as it did. It was a big collaborative effort.

Ausha

Yeah, I'll just add again like it really was a full team effort from partnership just across the board. For the Center for Independence, Sound Transit, King County Metro -- we really involved all of our partnerships across the region in this project just because we wanted to ensure that we were doing it the right way. We took feedback from our members from the community: those who are blind, deaf blind, low vision, you know, wanted to ensure that we did it right. Obviously this is a pilot project, so we are still seeking feedback and we will continue to seek feedback throughout this pilot project, but we want to make sure that we are meeting the needs of the Community. And through this time period, again we're welcoming the feedback and this is for our riders with, with vision loss, our writers with disabilities, we want to ensure equal access to all, and the partnership is what's important. You know, the goal is to unify the signage throughout the region whether a rider is going from Pierce County to Thurston County or from Pierce County to King County. You know the goal in the long run is to make this project to where, you know, the signs are going to be universal or unified throughout all of our region.

Tony

And I will add this has been something in the making for years. It just happened to be become a reality now, but there are people who were collaborating on this before my time, long time before I got here. For some reason or another, it didn't happen. Now it's been not only a collaborative effort for the team members now and partners now, but it's also a reality for those who pioneered it in the beginning, who

tried to get it done and just couldn't for some reason. So it's been a long time coming, so it's great to see all of the effort from everybody finally be rewarded with this pilot program.

Penny

And Ausha, you talked about some of the hopes for the future as far as this going regional. But what are the next steps as you see it for this project? And how might it be expanded across our service area to other transit centers?

Ausha

Yeah. So the next steps for us for now is to again continue to collect feedback from our riders with vision loss. That way we can expand our signage throughout our service area. The goal is to have an accessible sign at every bus stop through our service area. But first we need to secure the funding so that that is our one of our next steps is to seek additional grant opportunities. We have already applied for a few grants, and so we're hoping to get some feedback in regards to whether or not we are awarded. And then meet together as a work group. As I mentioned, we have established a work group and we will continue to talk amongst each other to discuss our future goals. For right now, we will determine which locations will incorporate the accessible bus stop signs first.

Right now, they're down at Commerce. The next location may be, you know, in hospital areas or areas that are most frequently traveled by our riders with vision loss.

Penny

OK. Thanks. Now, our last question here is again for both of you. It's really more of a dream scenario, kind of a question. What features would be found in a transit center that could be used equitably by everybody needing to travel?

Tony

I guess it depends on the transit center cause a lot of it depends on the design of the transit center, I would like to see things be more wheelchair accessible. More audible, more broad, more large print things and things that are easy to navigate, not always twist and turns. I would really like to see that like these little floor guides. Kinda better tactile wayfinding information, I guess, in the transit centers will be helpful. I mean, I would have to really sit and think about it. And again, it would depend on the transit center; outside the transit center, something that differentiates the poles cause a lot of the poles feel the same. And so I can't differentiate between the bus stop pole and the regular pole. So having this accessible signage plus some additional redundancy behind it would be the dream for me. A lot of audio for me. I'm an audible person, so I like a lot of audio.

Ausha

Yes, I agree with all of what Tony said, but definitely clear navigation at our transit centers with audio visual, large print as Tony said. You know. Really important to ensure easy access for all. So that should always be our goal. You know, anytime we're able to improve accessibility for our riders with disabilities. In this case, you know, our riders with disabilities, they expressed an area where there are barriers. Then we responded. I feel like this is an area where if we're able to do something, help improve our system

then why not? And please continue to share with us areas where we can improve so we can make those improvements within our system to help you.

Tony

I think that's the key is getting those people, those stakeholders, people with disabilities and other stakeholders in on the ground floor of the project. Before it's released to the public. Get them in on the design level because that's gonna create the most equitable circumstances because you're getting all of the voices that you need so before you build something, make sure you're talking to those community members that are actually gonna be using that particular product or building or whatever it may be.

And that way you'll get all of the feedback that you need. Listen; don't just take the feedback to check off a box. Listen and make the improvements. Pierce Transit did it. They heard us, and now they're making the improvements. There's no reason why any other organization couldn't do the same thing as well.

Penny

I wanted to ask you, Ausha, if folks want to give feedback, if they have successfully used the new signage or if they have some other ideas about it they like to share, what's the best way that they could reach out and share their feedback or their input?

Ausha

Yes, feel free to reach out to me directly on my telephone number is 253-581-8144. Or an e-mail to be sent to me at apotts@piercetransit.org

Ausha

Or you can go to our website at www.PierceTransit.org. And there is a comment page and you can leave a comment there and that will get to me as well.

Penny

She has been working so hard on this project on behalf of the folks that it will help. And I think the agency is very proud of her and this project and all the help from community members like Tony. And others. One of the things that it's interesting to mention is we are the first transit agency to have this kind of signage for a fixed route service in the region, isn't that right?

Ausha

That is correct.

Penny

So it's pretty innovative and a big deal for us here and hopefully for the community as well.

Ausha

Right.

Penny

Great. Well, we've come to the end of another episode, so I'd like to thank you, Ausha and Tony, for explaining the accessible signage project and for being pioneers in getting this wayfinding innovation off the ground here in our community. So thank you.