Investing in Advanced Accessibility Solutions

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By Richard Tackett May 1, 2019

BUSRide convened with thought leaders to discuss accessible vehicles and technology. The panelists discussed significant ADA investments and how to protect them, managing stakeholders, necessary institutional changes, and “disrupting” accessibility technology.

Our panelists:

Dave Brown, *MobilityTRANS,* President

Keven Crawford, *AbiliTrax,* Managing Partner

Bill Ott, *Q'Straint,* Vice President of Global Engineering

Ami Sailor, *ARBOC Specialty Vehicles,* Marketing Manager

Please introduce your agency or company and provide a brief overview of your expertise and capabilities.

Ami Sailor: ARBOC is North America's low-floor, body-on-chassis ("cutaway") bus leader serving transit, paratransit, and shuttle applications. With more than 3,500 buses produced, ARBOC leads the low-floor cutaway bus market providing unsurpassed passenger accessibility and comfort over traditional standard-floor cutaway vehicles. ARBOC also offers fully-accessible medium-duty products for transit and shuttle applications. The fully-accessible, low-floor product line exceeds federal American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards and endures more safety testing than any other buses on the market. At varying price points, these products meet the needs for public fixed route transportation, dial-a-ride services, assisted living, religious organizations, hotel shuttles and more. The product lineup includes the Spirit of Mobility, Spirit of Freedom, Spirit of Liberty, Spirit of Independence, Spirit of Equess, and the new Spirit of Legacy.

Bill Ott: Q'STRAINT is a world leader in the development, manufacturing and distribution of wheelchair securement systems. We are dedicated to improving the transportation safety for those in the mobility community and are committed to driving global standards that deliver this mission. As vice president of global engineering I am responsible for the development of new products and supporting the application understanding for our customers. I have a broad background in product innovation and I am passionate about bringing new solutions to the mobility community.

David Brown: I delivered my first paratransit van in 1981 and my wife and I started MobilityTRANS in 1992. We specialize in paratransit vans and small buses. We are familiar with the latest equipment used around the world in public transportation.

I like to say that we're the most experienced company doing what we're doing. We're not the largest, but I do hope we are the most experienced.

Keven Crawford: I'm a managing partner at Fenton Mobility/AbiliTrax. Over the past five years, Fenton Mobility has introduced to the industry some of the most advanced mobility solutions that have been launched in decades. Truly game changing products and more are coming. Fenton Mobility's AbiliTrax product line is a suite of state-of-the-art equipment solutions that provides unequaled flexibility and safety in meeting special mobility needs. For over 30 years I've been helping to provide solutions in the special transportation sectors. I began my career at The Braun Corporation immediately out of college, where I rose through the ranks to the position of executive vice president / marketing. During my tenure at Braun I was instrumental in setting up Braun's division locations as well as setting up both domestic and international dealers. I also took the leadership role at Braun in securing its first mobility patents, of which I'm a listed patent holder as well.

ADA is a mandate, but private operators and public agencies often want to go "above and beyond" ADA requirements. This often means a significant investment in accessible transportation solutions. What advice can you offer them when it comes to securing support from stakeholders — either from within or outside their organization?

Crawford: By now, most are keenly aware of the huge aging demographic that has being "growing" in this country. As noted in a recent U.S. Census Bureau article, "In less than two decades, the graying of America will be inescapable: Older adults are projected to outnumber kids for the first time in U.S. history. Already, the middle-aged outnumber children, but the country will reach a new milestone in 2035. That year, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that older adults will edge out children in population size: People age 65 and over are expected to number 78.0 million, while children under age 18 will number 76.7 million. With this swelling number of older adults, the country will see greater demands for healthcare, in-home caregiving and assisted living facilities…and, accessible transportation, and allot of it, will be an absolute necessity to support this very large and aging population group.

And, as my long-term business colleague Don Szudarek, administrator of Support Services at OLW of northeast Ohio, pointed out to me, ADA is for everyone; in addition to the aging population there is an ever-growing need for services for persons with disabilities. There is a big push in the DD community to have individuals with disabilities (who are able to) live on their own, in their own house or apartment; no longer in institutions and care settings. With these changes there is a greater need for "nonstandard mass transit. If an individual is not given the tools to succeed, they are destined to fail."

Brown: Transportation is all about accommodation. You must communicate to your stakeholders that with the latest technology, you can accommodate more people. The risks are too great. First and foremost, as an operator, you want to transport as many people as possible. But the cost of turning someone away – and dealing with the ramifications of that – are much higher than the investment in newer, safer and more accessible technology.

Sailor: Exceeding ADA requirements can be a costly investment but is vital in obtaining equal access for everyone. Stakeholders should be aware of the efficiency that exceeding ADA requirements allows. By way of illustration, a ramp deploys in under ten seconds while a wheelchair lift takes several minutes. This cuts down on the time it takes for not only mobility passengers to board, but also for children, seniors, and passengers utilizing strollers or luggage. Because they no longer have to wait as the lift is being lowered and raised, mobility passengers are not stuck in extreme weather conditions and inclement weather does not affect the cabin climate. This equates to shorter route times and a much more comfortable experience for all riders.

Ramps are also considerably safer than lifts and steps. A majority of accidents that occur on transit buses are trips and falls when passengers are entering or exiting the vehicle using the three or four entry steps. Utilizing the ramp eliminates this scenario and reduces the number of incidents significantly.

Ott: The current ADA requirements assure minimum standards that need to be met to provide access and safety for all riders. However, we have seen significant interest from operators and agencies in engaging the mobility community to better understand their needs. I would recommend having the mobility community's voice involved with all accessibility transportation solutions. We frequently see the operators and agencies listening to their customer's desire for dignity and independence and going above the minimum requirements to utilize leading solutions like the QUANTUM alongside the Q'POD.

What kind of institutional changes or other solutions should agencies and operator consider in order to "protect the investment" in innovative accessibility technology?

Ott: With technology continuing to change at a rapid rate there will always be a risk of obsolescence and the need for agencies and operators to upgrade to improve efficiencies and services to their customers. The best approach to reduce the impacts of these changes is to leverage solutions from reputable companies with a track record of delivering innovation who will consider the long-term needs of their customers as they develop new products.

Crawford: There are numerous state operating mandates relating to accessible transportation providers, I feel a more unified national set of standards would allow accessible transposition providers a more efficient business model to then reach out with their services.

Sailor: Technology is continuously adapting and improving, making it difficult to ensure your investment won't become outdated in a short period of time. Many types of equipment can be easily upgraded through simple software updates. This type of equipment is desirable in comparison to technology that requires costly hardware replacements. Maintaining equipment properly will prolong its life. Advanced accessible technology comes with a higher level of required maintenance for long-term sustainability.

Brown: New innovations often go through several versions until equipment becomes reliable and durable. Consider not being the first to try something new. Check with other agencies to find out which new equipment has proven heartiest for them.

If one segment of a trip is not accessible, then the trip itself is not accessible. How can agencies or operators better design their services in order to avoid this outcome?

Brown: If an agency has vehicles with differing capabilities to accommodate individuals with special needs and the vehicles are in the same area of service, the stated capabilities should be the minimum capability to avoid a situation like this.

Sailor: A growing number of fleets across North America operate 100 percent fully-accessible fleet. This is the easiest way to ensure entire trips are accessible.

Ott: This scenario cuts to the heart of our mission to make mobility safety accessible to all. Many agencies or operators share this belief and design their services accordingly. However, this goal is challenged with the reality of operating budgets and revenue goals. It will take a conscious effort to analyze routes and mobility ridership to make dynamic adjustments to these routes to minimize stranded mobility riders. Ultimately, this vision will not be completely resolved until all buses are mobility enabled.

Crawford: Stay innovative, always keep an open mind, and visit other successful operations.

What is the biggest innovation or "disruptor" in accessibility you foresee being implemented in the next decade?

Ott: We certainly know that accessibility innovation is not going away and has already started playing a huge role in transportation overall. While we may not have specific examples of innovations to help improve accessibility, we know that Q'STRAINT will continue to play a role to make sure these technologies go beyond accessibility to space and extend to higher levels of safety. Any innovations that brings inclusion, dignity and autonomy to the ADA community will be the ones we will encourage.

Crawford: In my opinion, specifically within the paratransit sector, which is where I focus all my efforts, the biggest innovation has been the AbiliTrax system. I frequently hear from my customers that they now have the "right sized" vehicle in their paratransit fleet. It's larger than a lowered floor minivan, which means it can easily handle larger bariatric wheelchairs (which are becoming more and more prevalent in day to day transport) and several ambulatory passengers as well. With the Ford Transit van upfitted with the AbiliTrax system, including the dual access "Shift N Step" system for curb side loading, paratransit operators now have a choice in an operating system that earlier was not available.

Sailor: The loading method and securement of wheelchairs and scooters is evolving. We have already seen Q'Straint's INQLINE Assist, as well as their QUANTUM. The INQLINE is an automatic winch system that smoothly guides the mobility device safely in and out of the vehicle. Steering is controlled by the operator via a thumb controller. This allows the driver to have full control over the ascent and descent of a mobility device without the physical strain. The QUANTUM is an automatic rear-facing securement station that allows mobility passengers to secure themselves, with no driver assistance, in less than 25 seconds with a simple push of a button. As more and more transit agencies adopt this technology, it will progress and complementary products develop, furthering the progression of boarding and securing mobility devices. In history, stiffer ADA requirements have forced accessibility equipment to evolve. This is expected to continue throughout the next decade, which could potentially result in fleets implementing entire design changes in order to comply.

Brown: An electric low-floor van or bus would be a major disrupter, but the challenge is in the available space. There is simply nowhere for the battery to go!

The biggest innovation has been the continuing improvement in quality and variety of low-floor vans and buses. Manufacturers have made major strides in ensuring that these vehicles meet the most rigid and safe engineering standards. A low-floor vehicle not only allows easier access for an individual in a wheelchair – it allows equal access for all passengers. There isn't

a separate door and lift for passengers with wheelchairs. It's much more dignified and much more mainstream for a person to enter the same doorway in the same manner as an ambulatory person.