

# WATA ridership decreased since last year — but ADA services are in high demand. Here's why

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Bus-riders wait for their bus at a stop at the Walmart on East Rochambeau Drive in York County. (WYDaily/Sarah Fearing)

While Greater Williamsburg is not a bustling metropolitan area on the scale of Norfolk or Richmond, people around town are still accustomed to seeing red and white public transportation buses of varying shapes and sizes rolling around town.

The full-size buses are the most common, but those in Williamsburg may have been seeing the short, red, Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible buses a little more frequently.

“There are a lot of people that have a problem getting on a traditional bus,” said WATA spokeswoman Michele Canty.

Ridership on the Williamsburg Area Transportation Authority's ADA-accessible buses has gradually grown in recent years, according to ridership data released by WATA earlier this month.

Canty said the increase is likely because of two things: Increased awareness of WATA's services for those with disabilities, as well as a growing and aging area population.

WATA has five ADA-accessible buses and vans that make about 60 to 75 trips per day, Canty said.

"There's a tremendous need for this service in this area," she added.

## Data shows...

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Any transit agency that receives funding from the federal government is required to have some sort of paratransit — or ADA-accessible — service.

ADA ridership increased almost every single month of fiscal year 2019 compared to the same months in fiscal years 2018 and 2017.

ADA ridership increased 20.2 percent year to date in April. Fixed-route ridership, however, saw a 3.4-percent decrease in the same period.

WATA's paratransit service had 9,746 riders from July 2018 to April 2019. Overall, fixed-route ridership hovered around 701,000 for the same amount of time.

WATA's ADA buses will take people to work, doctor's appointments, the grocery store and more. Staff on board are trained to help those with disabilities, Canty said.

"There are a lot of retirees and folks with disabilities... that's a population that continues to go up," Canty said. "We anticipate some more riders in the future. People are getting older."

U.S. Census Bureau data shows 6.7 percent of Williamsburg's population younger than 65 years old is disabled. James City County is at 8 percent, and York County is at 8.1 percent.

## How the service works

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WATA has five buses and vans that are specifically ADA-accessible. Unlike the regular buses scheduled on set routes, the routes of the ADA buses change as more people request the service.

There are no set routes for the paratransit buses because they pick up riders as-needed.

The one-ride fare for a paratransit bus is \$3. The one-ride standard fare for regular buses is \$1.50.

Any Greater Williamsburg resident within WATA's transit area can request an ADA bus pick them up if they live within a quarter-mile of one of WATA's 13 regular routes.

Those interested need to apply through WATA to use the service, meaning there's some preparation ahead of time to see whether the rider qualifies under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

There are also a limited number of ADA trips WATA can make in one day.

Then, the operations director would call the prospective rider and figure out what particular services they need and where they need to go.

Canty said the transit authority will seek additional funding in the future if the need increases to the point where they need to buy more paratransit buses. That funding could come in the form of federal grants.

"People who use our ADA services become dedicated riders," Canty said.

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