

The logo for the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) features the acronym "DRPT" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. Below the letters are three small white circles and a horizontal white line.

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF RAIL
AND PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Transit Ridership Incentive Program

Fiscal Year 2023 Overview

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Transit Ridership Incentive Program

The 2020 General Assembly established the Transit Ridership Incentive Program (TRIP) in Virginia Code § 33.2-1526.3 to grow and improve transit use. The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) administers the statewide grant program.

TRIP has undergone several changes since its creation in 2020, mostly because of the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on transit as well as evolving transit priorities. This report explains the General Assembly's changes to the program as well as the early projects funded through TRIP.

DRPT implemented the program in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 with the first round of transit projects receiving TRIP funding. So far, DRPT has allocated \$60.4 million in TRIP funding to a total of 19 projects — most of which operate over multiple years — that support zero-fare or reduced-fare programming or regional connectivity. Of those projects, \$24.4 million in TRIP funding went toward eight zero-fare and reduced-fare projects, and \$36.0 million supported 11 regional connectivity projects.

Background

The 2020 General Assembly established TRIP with two distinct goals: to improve regional connectivity of urban areas with a population more than 100,000 and to reduce barriers to transit use for low-income riders by supporting reduced-fare and zero-fare programming.

TRIP's creation coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. DRPT conducted outreach about the program with transit agencies, who shared a stronger interest in zero-fare and reduced-fare programming. During the pandemic, fewer people used transit, so transit agencies did not prioritize launching regional connectivity projects until they grew their ridership.

Virginia Code § 33.2-1526.3 originally stated that no more than 25 percent of TRIP funding could be allocated to programs to reduce barriers to transit use for low-income riders, requiring a minimum of 75 percent of the funds be allocated to regional connectivity projects.

In 2022, the General Assembly changed the funding structure so that at least 25 percent of funds are allocated to zero-fare or reduced-fare projects, and at least 25 percent of funds are allocated to regional connectivity projects. The remaining 50 percent could go toward either purpose. This change to the funding distribution will sunset on July 1, 2024.

The 2023 General Assembly approved additional changes to the TRIP funding distribution. According to House Bill 2338 and Senate Bill 1326, a maximum of 30 percent of TRIP funds can be used to support transit agencies with improving passenger amenities and facilities such as bus stops and addressing crime prevention and public safety. These two types of programs address target areas of concern raised by transit riders during the HJ 542 transit modernization study DRPT conducted in 2021 and 2022 at the General Assembly’s request. This change to the funding distribution has no sunset.

In summary, starting in FY25, no more than 25 percent can be used for zero-fare and reduced-fare programs, no more than 30 percent can be used for crime prevention and passenger amenities, and at least 45 percent must be used for regional connectivity programs. DRPT developed a revised policy to incorporate the changes from the General Assembly and how to score and allocate funding to the different projects. The Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) approved the policy in September 2023.

Funding and Distribution

TRIP receives six percent of the Commonwealth Mass Transit Fund. Grant recipients provide matching funds for TRIP projects. Of the TRIP projects funded so far, grant recipients have contributed \$67.8 million in matching funds.

For the zero-fare and reduced-fare projects, the policy provides for three-year pilots, with a funding step-down over the life of the pilot project. Funding is provided for three years, but it is anticipated that projects will run for four years, with agencies fully funding the fourth year. For regional routes projects, the policy provides for up to five-year pilots, with a funding step-down over the life of the project.

TRIP has not yet funded any crime prevention or passenger amenities projects, as the FY24 application cycle had already closed when the legislation passed. DRPT opened a mid-cycle application in September 2023 to solicit additional applications for these project types. Those projects will primarily receive one-time funding.

Table 1 shows the funding available to TRIP over the next six fiscal years.

Table 1. Fiscal Years 2024-2029 TRIP Funding (in millions)

	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	FY28	FY29	Total
Total	\$26.9	\$28.0	\$28.6	\$29.2	\$29.7	\$30.2	\$172.6

Launching TRIP Projects

So far, DRPT has allocated TRIP funding to a total of 19 projects that support zero-fare or reduced-fare programming or regional connectivity. Most projects have begun service to Virginians.

Since TRIP's creation in 2020, DRPT has accepted applications in Fiscal Years 2022-2024. So far, TRIP has only funded zero-fare and reduced-fare programs or regional connectivity projects. TRIP will fund crime prevention and passenger amenities and facilities projects in a mid-cycle grant that opened in September 2023 and during the next round of funding.

Eligibility and Selection Process

DRPT has emphasized three key themes for project evaluation. First, DRPT prioritized projects that demonstrated local and community support. This could be exhibited by letters of support from the appropriate jurisdictions or metropolitan planning organizations as well as from the identification of project partners. Additionally, DRPT searched for well-planned projects. Ideally, TRIP-funded projects would already be identified as a need — and evaluated as such — prior to agencies applying for TRIP funding. This preference allowed for more thoughtful and deliberate applications. DRPT intended to fund projects already in a local or agency level planning document. Lastly, DRPT preferred funding projects that could be implemented with relatively low startup costs.

The CTB approved an updated TRIP policy in September 2023 that outlined the eligibility and scoring process for the different types of TRIP projects.



“The Transit Ridership Incentive Program encourages transit agencies to be innovative and flexible in developing solutions to best meet the transportation needs of Virginians.”

— DRPT Director Jennifer DeBruhl

The TRIP policy states that public transit providers receiving state operating assistance pursuant to Virginia Code 33.2-1526.1 D, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), Planning District Commissions (PDC), and other statewide bodies are eligible for zero fare and reduced fare funding, crime prevention and public safety funding, and passenger amenities and facilities funding.

The TRIP policy states that entities that are eligible for TRIP regional connectivity funding must be the following: public transit providers that serve a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) exceeding a population of 100,000 and receive state operating assistance or MPOs, PDCs, and other statewide or regional bodies that serve an MSA exceeding a population of 100,000. Virginia Code requires that funding be distributed to each eligible region proportionally within a five-year period, based on their regional population.



Quick TRIP Numbers

\$60.4 million in TRIP funds allocated
\$67.8 million in matching funds contributed
Eight zero-fare or reduced-fare projects
Eleven regional connectivity projects

Current TRIP Projects

TRIP has supported diverse, multi-year projects throughout the Commonwealth. The grant recipients are geographically diverse, and they range in sizes, from large urban transit agencies to small urban and rural transit agencies.

In FY22, DRPT received 14 applications: three for regional connectivity and 11 for zero-fare or reduced-fare programs.

DRPT recommended funding nine projects: six zero-fare or reduced-fare programs and all three regional connectivity projects. In FY23, DRPT received two applications for zero fare and five applications for regional connectivity projects. DRPT recommended funding both zero-fare programs and four regional connectivity projects. In FY24, DRPT received four regional connectivity applications, and DRPT recommended all of them for funding.

Zero Fare/Reduced Fare Projects

As anticipated, TRIP's pilot year had the most applicants. This can be attributed to a high interest in zero-fare and reduced-fare programming. With ridership still below pre-pandemic levels and remote work still a prominent option for many employers, most transit agencies focused on regaining ridership before introducing new routes.

Table 2. Fiscal Years (FY) 2022-2023 TRIP Zero-Fare/Reduced-Fare Projects

FY	Project	Description	Funding Duration	TRIP Funding	FY19 Ridership	FY23 Ridership	% Change
22	Greater Richmond Transit Company zero fare	Deploy zero-fare operations on all GRTC local routes, express routes, and GRTC Care services.	4 years	\$8,000,000	8.9M	9.6M	7.9%
	City of Alexandria zero fare	Deploy zero-fare operations for all services.	4 years	\$7,236,171	4.0M	4.6M	15%
	Fairfax subsidized pass program	Provide half-fare SmarTrip cards for riders with annual income that meets the 225 percent federal poverty levels by threshold.	4 years	\$5,494,740	8.3M	8.4M	0.4%
	Mountain Empire Older Citizens zero fare	Deploy zero-fare operations for all services.	4 years	\$102,000	98K	131K	33.7%
	FXBGO! zero fare	Deploy zero-fare operations for all services.	4 years	\$561,960	297K	288K	-3.1%
	Charlottesville Area Transit zero fare¹	Deploy zero-fare operations for all services.	4 years	\$1,066,620	1.9M	1.1M	-42.1%
23	City of Fairfax zero fare	Deploy zero-fare operations for all services.	4 years	\$651,000	601K	848K	41.1%
	Petersburg Area Transit zero fare	Deploy zero-fare operations for all services.	4 years	\$1,333,231	410K	476K	16.1%

Between FY19 and FY23, ridership on these systems generally increased while statewide transit ridership, excluding Virginia Railway Express and Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, declined nearly 22 percent.

¹ The Charlottesville Area is experiencing a bus driver shortage. Charlottesville Area Transit must compete with the local divisions, JAUNT, and the University of Virginia bus system for drivers. For that reason, Charlottesville Area Transit is maintaining pandemic level service which is negatively impacting ridership.

Regional Connectivity Projects

Transit agencies have an interest not only in moving people within their communities but also in increasing regional mobility to improve their access to opportunities.

With ridership growing — with some transit agencies reporting ridership returning to or exceeding pre-pandemic levels — transit agencies have been more interested in regional connectivity projects in the most recent TRIP funding round.

Table 3. Fiscal Years 2022-2023 (FY) Regional Connectivity Projects

FY	Project	Description	Funding Duration	TRIP Funding	Project Ridership
22	Hampton Roads Naval Base Express	It provides last-mile accessibility to employees within the base. The goal of the service is to encourage employees to arrive at the base by transit, foot, or bicycle, and then use the circulator to travel within the base. There are two routes that operate Monday through Friday, and one of them operates on the weekend.	3 years	\$2,388,198	14,908 <i>12/2/22-6/30/23</i>
	Lynchburg Route 4 Expansion	GLTC increased frequencies by adding a third bus on Route 4. The route operates on a commercial corridor in Lynchburg, providing access to the regional airport, train station, Liberty University, and other locations of interest. The bus runs Monday through Friday.	5 years	\$1,630,400	15,304 <i>9/19/22-6/30/23</i>
23	Loudoun County Silver Line Bus Routes²	As part of a transit system redesign in conjunction with the opening of the Silver Line, Loudoun County created 16 new transit routes. TRIP provided funding for four of the transit routes connecting to the new Ashburn, Loudoun Gateway, and Dulles International Airport Metrorail Silver Line stations.	5 years	\$7,250,811	6,178 <i>1/1/23-6/30/23</i>

² Loudoun County's transit services had several challenges since the Metrorail Silver Line opened in November 2022. First, the county faced a bus operator shortage and did not have enough drivers for the new routes. The routes were running one bus rather than two. Second, the bus operators went on strike between January and March 2023. In March, three of the new routes funded through TRIP were not operating. It was not until May that the four new routes were fully operational with two buses as envisioned in their application. Ridership has continued to grow, and Loudoun County is going to have an advertising campaign to inform people about the new routes.

OmniRide Manassas Metro Express Bus Service³	OmniRide began offering mid-day and off-peak service for its Manassas Metro Express Bus. Previously, the agency only offered peak service for this route that serves destinations including Tysons Corner, the Metro Silver Line, and the Northern Virginia Community College Manassas campus.	5 years	\$1,041,897	5,454 <i>1/30/23- 6/30/23</i>
Radford Transit Route 40/41	Radford Area Transit began offering year-round service of Route 40/41, which connects Christiansburg to Radford and Blacksburg.	3 years	\$371,746	1,842 <i>1/17/23- 6/30/23</i>

As of this writing, DRPT has only collected approximately six to nine months of ridership data for these regional connectivity routes. DRPT and its transit partners are cautiously optimistic that ridership will grow as the agencies market these routes and people become more aware of their availability. DRPT staff will continue to monitor these routes closely and will decide in early 2024 whether they should continue to receive state funds.

Upcoming Projects

The Greater Richmond Transit Company will launch microtransit — technology-enabled on-demand multi-passenger service — routes in fall 2023. Hampton Roads Transit will begin its microtransit pilot service in early 2024. The agency will be building on testing of microtransit that it started in July 2022 — but is currently paused — to allow more time for ridership to mature.

Fairfax County will distribute 50 percent discount SmarTrip cards with Fairfax Connector routes to Fairfax County, City of Fairfax, and City of Falls Church residents with an annual income that meets the 225 percent federal poverty levels by threshold in FY24.

Petersburg Area Transit’s Southern Express Route and Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission’s RideSmart commuter service has not yet set launch dates. Loudoun County and Fairfax County have not yet set a date for when to begin their integrated fare collection system projects.

³ Service faced disruption due to a strike in February and March 2023. OmniRide also continues to face lower ridership because of the federal workforce not fully returning to in-person working. Ridership continues to grow for the service, and OmniRide is reviewing the Express Bus for other possible route options to improve efficiency and convenience for passengers.

Table 4. Upcoming TRIP Projects

Project	Project Description	Funding Duration	TRIP Funding
Petersburg Southern Express	Deploy an express route connecting Petersburg and Emporia. This project will also serve Prince George, Sussex, and Greenville counties.	5 years	\$1,134,090
Greater Richmond Transit Company Microtransit	Fund three new microtransit routes serving Henrico County, North Chesterfield, and New Kent. These routes connect to existing GRTC service in Richmond and access key destinations.	3 years	\$4,057,766
Northern Shenandoah Valley Regional Commission RideSmart	Provide commuter service from the northern Shenandoah Valley to Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., providing access to key destinations, including Metrorail stations.	5 years	\$464,000
Loudoun County Integrated Fare Collection	Fund replacements to fare box equipment on 125 buses to correspond with the regional electronic fare collection system. This project will ensure fare collection operability between transit systems in this region.	1 year	\$3,680,330
Fairfax County Integrated Fare Collection	Fund replacements to fare boxes to coordinate with the regional effort to improve fare collection, ensuring fare collection operability between transit systems in this region.	1 year	\$1,200,000
Hampton Roads Microtransit	Fund two microtransit routes in Newport News and Virginia Beach. Routes access destinations such as hospitals, schools, and the Newport News-Williamsburg Airport.	1 year	\$2,800,000

Looking Ahead

Starting in September 2023, DRPT began accepting applications for an additional round of Transit Ridership Incentive Program projects. DRPT anticipates making recommendations to the Commonwealth Transportation Board at its December meeting. As this program celebrates its fourth anniversary next Spring, DRPT will continue to evaluate the program to determine the best use of these funds.