



# Westport Board of Finance Informal FY22 Budget Meeting

February 10, 2021

# Westport Transit District Services

- Commuter shuttles to and from Saugatuck and Greens Farms train stations.
- Door-to-Door transportation for seniors and residents with disabilities “within Westport.”
- Door-to-Door transportation for residents with disabilities between Westport and Fairfield Cty communities to our west (“Town-to-Town”).
- Services are provided under subcontract arrangement with Norwalk Transit District which assists the WTD in a number of ways.
  - NTD operates buses and provides support services.
  - WTD determines scope of operations after considering input of elected officials and the public, oversees arrangements with NTD, and manages activities such as marketing and budgeting.

# Why We Are Here

## WTD Services are a Westport Asset

The Town Plan of Conservation and Development (“POCD”), the Downtown Master Plan, and other recent studies are supportive of more public transportation in Westport. The 2017 POCD said:

“Westport should strive to preserve the service provided by the [WTD] for those who need it, those who use it because of the convenience it provides, and *for those who like to know the service is available for the situations where they may need it.*” (*italics added*)

# Why We Are Here

## WTD Services are a Westport Asset

As part of the FY20 budget process, numerous Westport residents and organizations expressed support for the commuter shuttle funding. These organizations and individuals included:

- Commission on People with Disabilities
- Downtown Merchants Association
- Downtown Plan Implementation Committee
- Individual commuters and non-commuters
- Sustainable Westport
- Save Westport Now
- Coalition for Westport
- Realtors

The RTM voted overwhelmingly (32 to zero with one abstention) to restore funds cut by the Board of Finance.

# Recent Developments

- In March 2020, the Board of Finance cut the WTD's requested \$359,000 FY21 budget by \$38,600. The WTD chose not to ask for restoration and the RTM did not vote on the issue.
- The Board of Finance expressed concern about the viability of the then current fixed route operating model.
- Due to the COVID-19 virus, on March 30, 2020 the WTD temporarily replaced its seven fixed commuter shuttle routes with an on-demand commuter service to and from Westport's two train stations and accelerated its plan to implement microtransit across most of Westport.
- On October 12, 2020, the WTD began operating Wheels2U Westport, an on-demand, door to station, group ride service, as a more user-friendly, cost efficient, flexible operating model.

# Wheels2U Westport

## The New Microtransit Operating Model

[Wheels2UWestport.com](http://Wheels2UWestport.com)

# Wheels2U Westport

Wheels2U Westport is an on-demand, door-to-door, group ride service better tailored to Westport's needs.

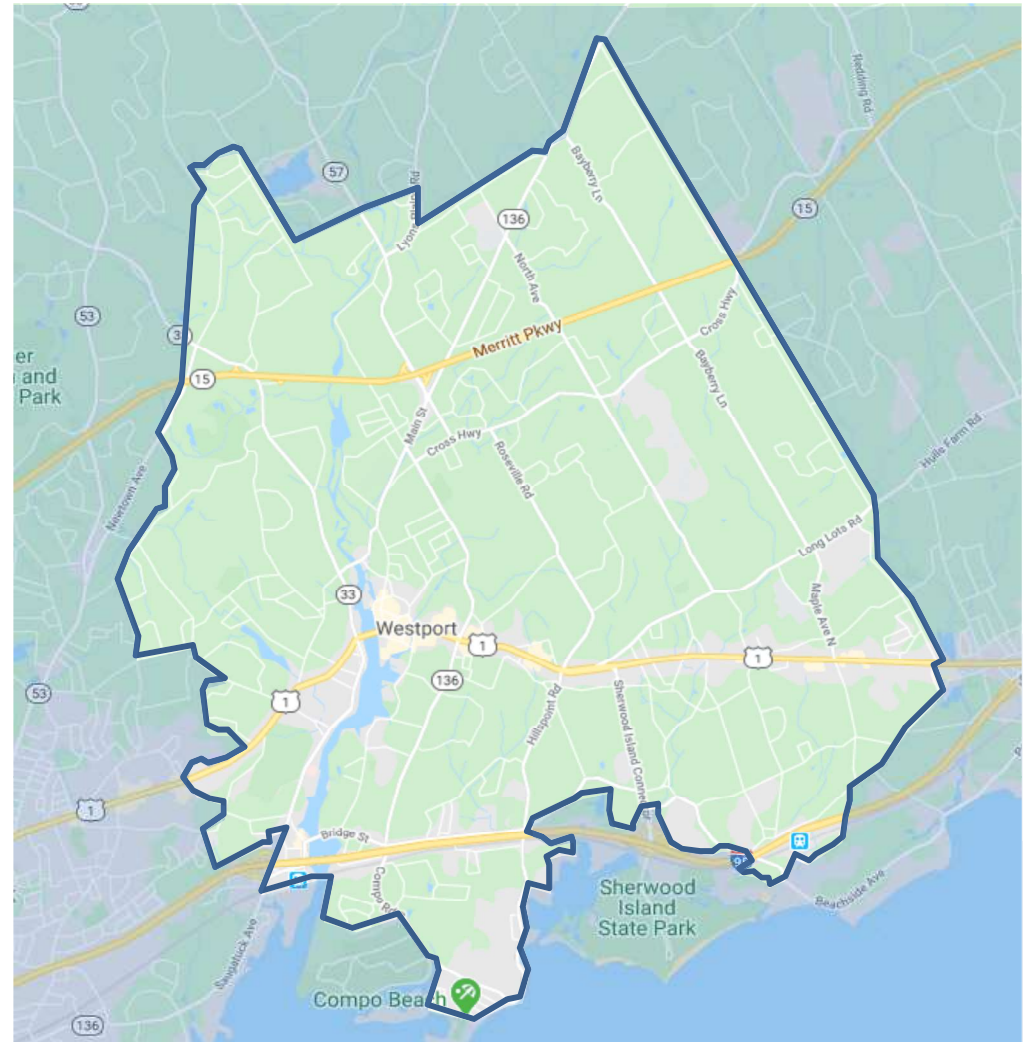
- Hours of operation:  
Peak commuting periods:
  - Morning pickups: between 5:45AM and 9:45AM
  - Evening pickups: between 4:00PM and 8:00PM
- Area of operation: Only between locations in the service area and the Greens Farms and Westport train stations.
- Scheduling a ride:  
Passengers use the Wheels2U App. Average ETA until bus arrives is 6 minutes.
- Fares:
  - \$2.00 paid with App or
  - \$45 with Uniticket (combined weekly/monthly Metro-North rail and bus pass)
- User Satisfaction: Average of 4.96 out of 5.

# Wheels2U Westport Coverage

## Previous Fixed Routes



## Wheels2U Service Area Door to Train Station Anywhere in the Service Area





# WHEELS 2U Westport

## How it Works

### 1. Download the Wheels2U App



### 2. Request A Pickup

### 3. Get Going



# Requesting a Pickup

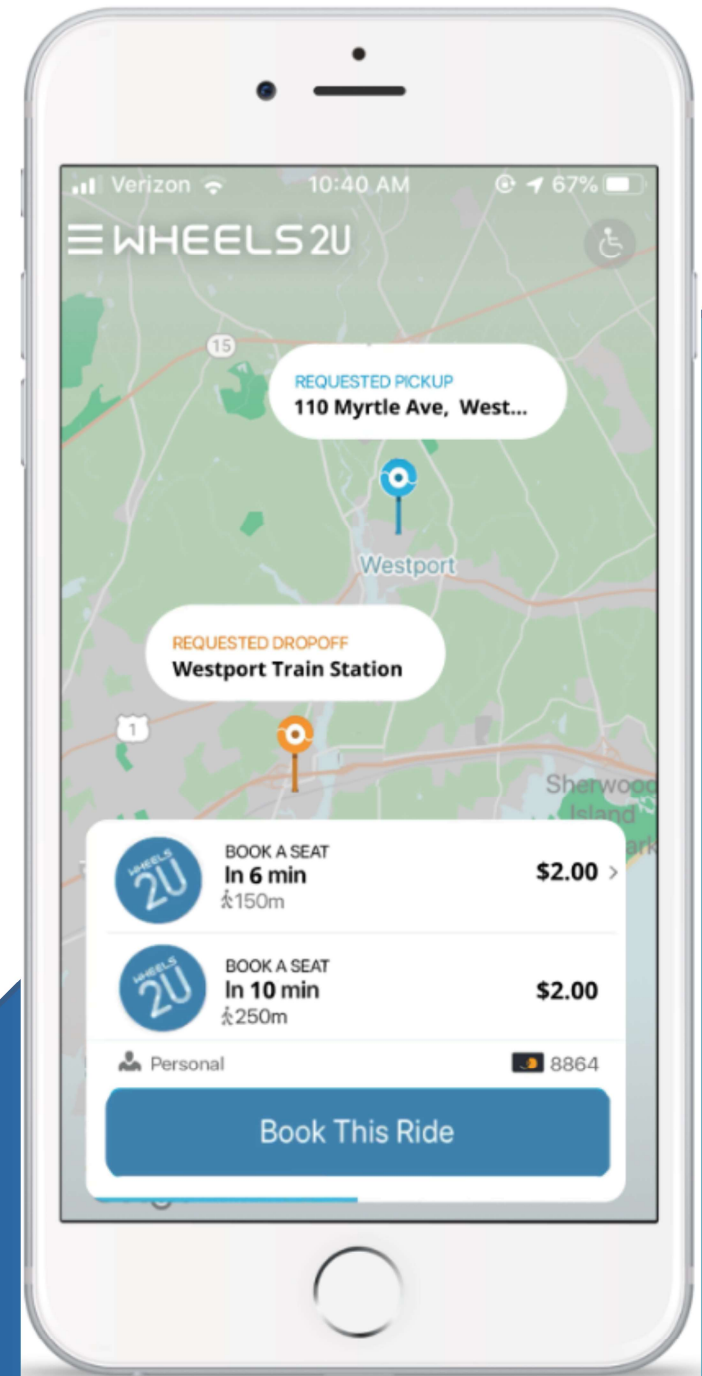
## Follow these simple steps:

- **Open the app and allow location services**
- **Enter your pick-up & drop-off locations\***
  - **Just choose a location from your “Favorites” list, which will be established as you use the App!**
- **Choose a pick-up time**
- **Select pay option: App or Uniticket**

**You can monitor expected pick up and arrival times!**

\* **Pick-up or drop-off must be at a train station. App will ask if there is more than one passenger or a wheelchair is required. (All vehicles are wheelchair accessible.)**

\*\* **Vehicle will wait no more than 2 minutes for passengers to board.**

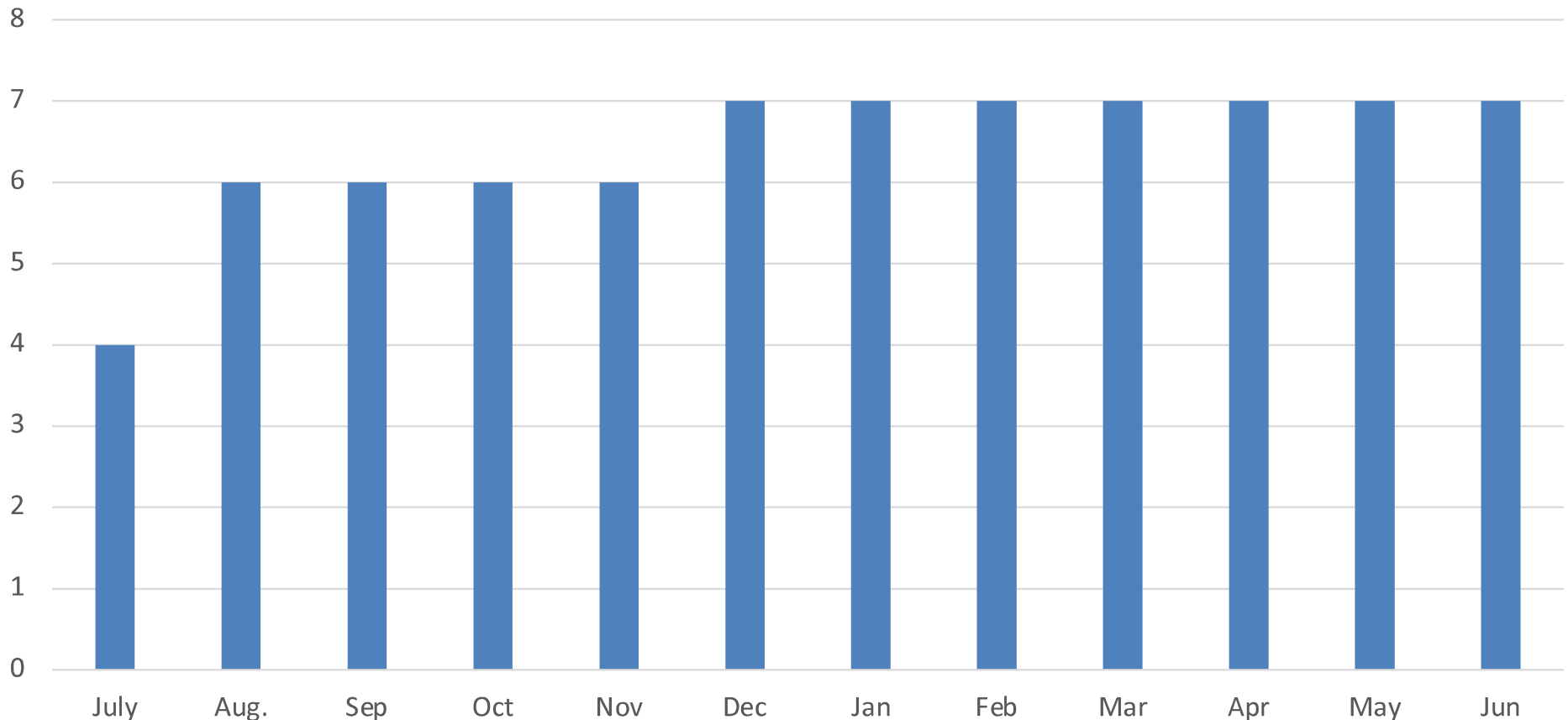


# Wheels2U Westport—Financial Benefits

- Conversion of fixed cost structure to semi-fixed cost structure provides an opportunity to more closely match resources with demand and likely increase efficiency.
  - Number of vehicles employed can be scaled up or down three times / year to match demand and control costs.
  - Vehicles travel only where commuters need to go.
    - Lowers the miles traveled, fuel consumption, and cost / trip
    - Makes the service “greener” with a lower carbon footprint.

# Wheels2U Westport

## Maximum Number of Buses Budgeted for FY22



- Assumes ramp up in line with assumed resumption in commuting.
- Average number of buses used is lower than shown above as WTD schedules fewer buses in non-peak periods (e.g., after 8 AM). Usage will be adjusted based on commuting patterns.

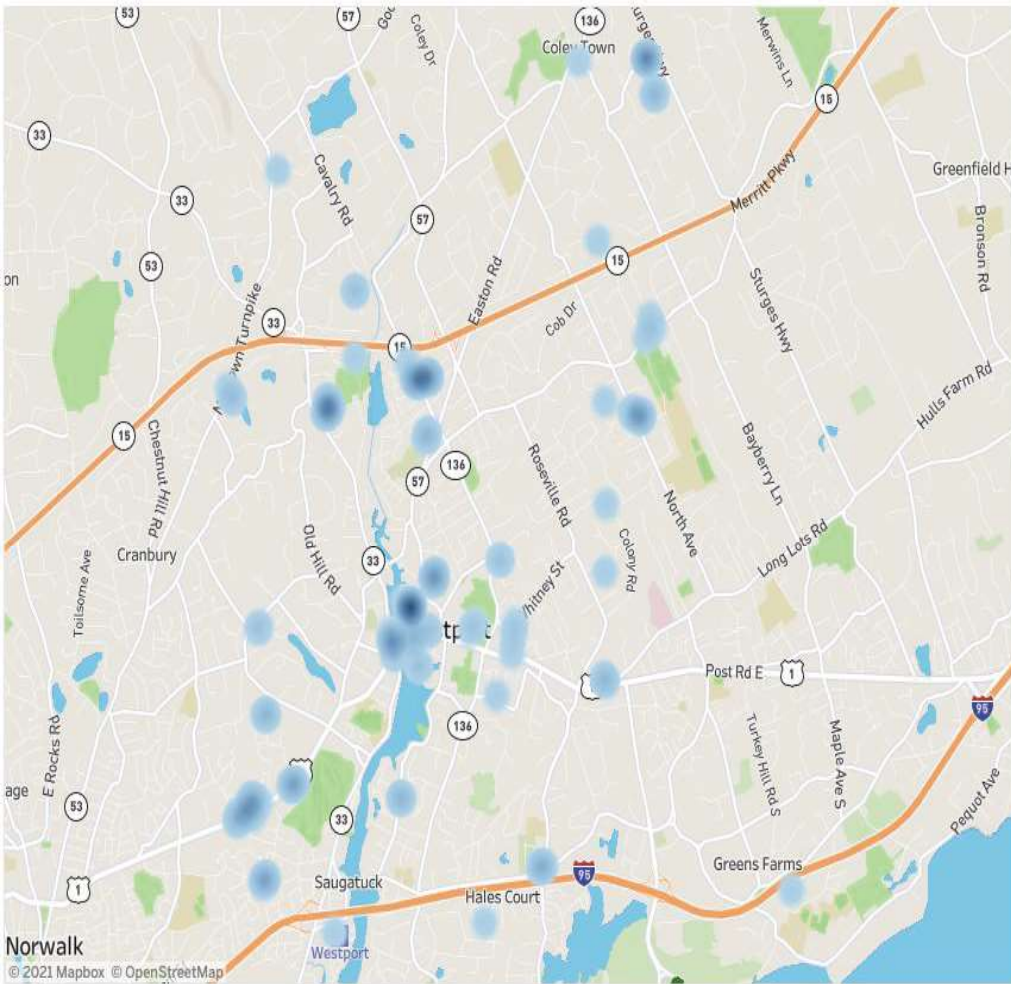
# Wheels2U Westport – User Benefits

- Door-to-train platform service eliminates walk from home to old fixed route and from remote parking lots to train platform.
- Greater geographic coverage; Wheels2U shuttles are convenient to more residents, increasing ridership potential.
- Coverage of more trains during peak commuting hours makes the service more attractive.
  - Previous fixed route service did not meet every train due to resource constraints.

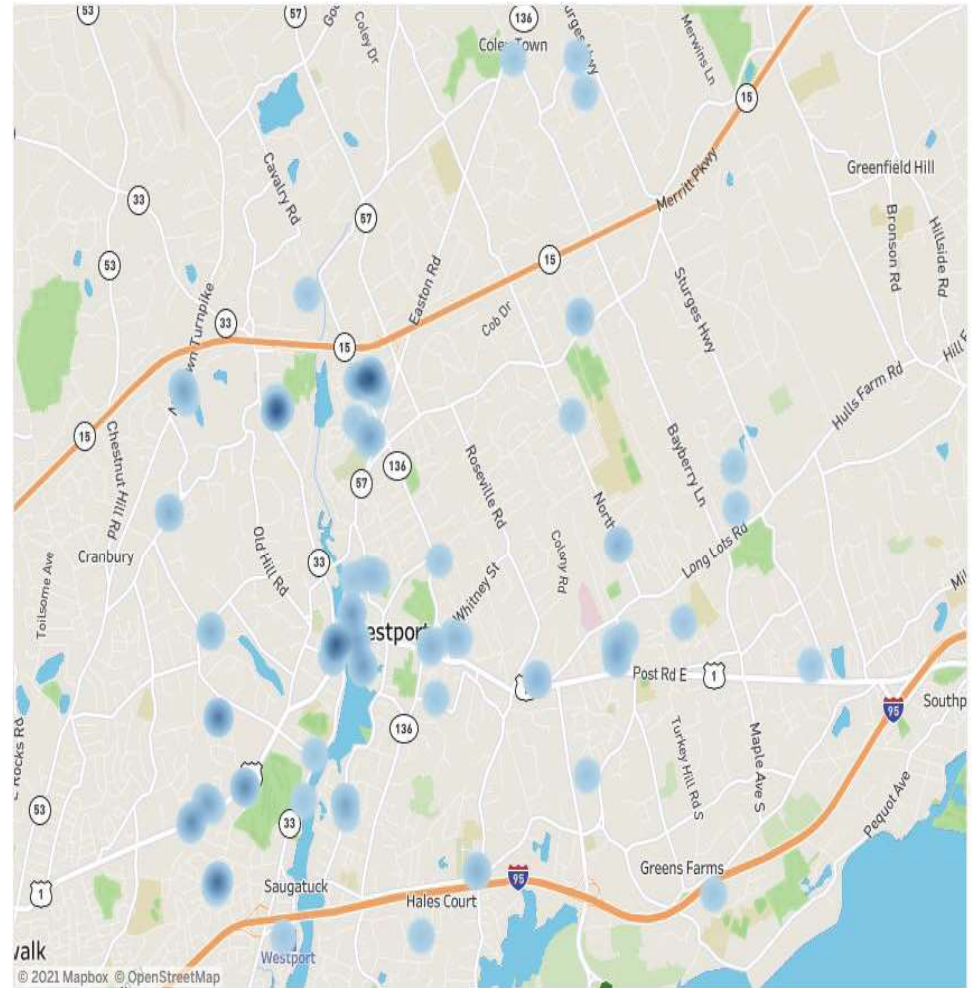
# Wheels2U Westport

## Origins and Destinations in Service Area

Requests by Origin - Density



Requests by Destination - Density



# Wheels2U Westport—User Benefits

- Shorter trips for some commuters addresses a complaint about fixed route system and improves service. Wheels2U shuttles don't need to travel around an entire circular fixed route.
- Increased efficiency of Wheels2U Westport model may enable the WTD to invest in enhancements such as:
  - Possible restoration of after school service.
  - Future extension of evening hours making the service more attractive to commuters who sometimes work later than current operating hours.
  - Expanding the service area to parts of Westport not currently included (e.g., Saugatuck Shores area).
- Step towards possible on-demand door-to-door service for seniors and residents with a disability (vs. current process of arranging ride prior day).

# Wheels2U Westport — Town Benefits

- Shuttles help reduce congestion and parking demand.
- Shuttles help improve environment, especially with future conversion to electric vehicles, help meet Town goals of Net Zero 2050, and are a long-term foundation for “Green” transportation.
- Shuttles support and attract new residents to Town who don’t have a car or who prefer a public transit alternative (e.g., millennials, young families, affordable housing).
  - Shuttles enable residents to not purchase second car for commuting.
  - Shuttles are a motivating factor for many families in choosing Westport and/or their particular residence.
- Shuttles support Westport businesses and economic development by providing cost effective link between train stations, employers and downtown.



# Wheels2U Westport — Town Benefits

- Shuttles differentiate Westport from other towns, supporting the real estate market and enhancing the “Westport brand.”
- Shuttles reduce need for additional parking at train stations (e.g., proposed new lots at Greens Farms); reducing capital and on-going maintenance costs.

# Wheels2U Westport — Opportunities

- Take advantage of flexibility afforded by Wheels2U operating model to adjust service to demand and reduce costs and/or expand services.
- Build off strong Wheels2U start during the pandemic. Wheels2U ridership is currently about 11% of pre-pandemic commuter shuttle level while Metro-North ridership is only about 6% of pre-pandemic level.
- Long interruption in commuting during the pandemic provides opportunity to change commuter behavior away from driving to station.
- Build on high commuter satisfaction with Wheels2U Westport; service consistently gets five star ratings.

# Leverage Wheels2U Westport

- Can help meet new and emerging Town needs for transportation
  - Teens and youth (Westport Youth Commission survey)
  - Seniors
  - Underserved populations
  - Increased use by workforce and reverse commuters
  - Transportation to vaccine distribution clinics
  - Discussions with other Town bodies and organizations regarding transportation needs such as:
    - Human Services Department
    - Homes With Hope
    - Team Westport
    - Downtown Merchants Assn.
    - Westport Housing Authority
    - Parks and Recreation Department
    - Gillespie Shelter
    - Other social service organizations
    - Chamber of Commerce
    - Senior/assisted living facilities

# Wheels2U Westport Challenges

- Difficulty in accurately predicting when, how rapidly, and to what extent commuting will increase is a planning challenge; however, Wheels2U model provides flexibility to match service levels to demand on relatively short notice.
- Change rider behavior: commuters need to use app to order rides individually or on a recurring basis.
- Some (low) probability of not arriving at station in time for targeted train vs. “nearly perfect” on time shuttle performance of previous fixed route system.
- Need to maintain higher than desired vehicle levels during current period of low commuting levels to avoid discouraging current and future users when commuting significantly picks up. Cost per ride will decline as commuting picks up.
- Maintenance of State funding formulas. No reason at this time to think there will be any changes.
- Significant risk—BOF. WTD needs to focus on operations, efficiencies, marketing, and planning beyond next budget cycle, instead of fighting with BOF and spending time dealing with budget cuts. WTD has very limited resources.

# COVID-19 Lessons

- Willingness to take bold action yielded long-term benefits.
  - Replaced seven fixed route service with on-demand service on March 31 and then with Wheels 2U microtransit on October 12..
  - Resulting flexibility, efficiency, cost savings, and user benefits of Wheels2U are sustainable.
  - Low commuting allowed for roll out of Wheels2U to entire service area all at once instead of previously planned three stage phase in. Resulted in reduced start-up costs as smaller service areas are less cost effective.
  - Ability to practice and iron out any bugs during period of low ridership.
- Interruption in commuting since March 2020 provides an opportunity to change user behavior when commuting ramps up again.
- New cleaning and disinfecting protocol.

## Preview of FY22

- Restart marketing campaign as commuting ramps up to increase ridership.
- Demonstrate benefits of Wheels2U model and tweak it to optimize performance and cost savings in the “new normal” commuting environment.
- Planning for improvements in door-to-door service including same day ability to schedule rides and contactless payment systems.
- Work on expanding Wheels2U beyond commuters to and from NYC—increased use by reverse commuters, workforce, after school, etc.
- Work with Town employers and organizations to explore opportunities for shared services/marketing.
- Work with Town departments and others on grants for transportation improvements (e.g., electric buses, etc.).

# Planned Wheels2U Marketing Posters

Our new  
Wheels2U shuttles  
go where our  
shuttles have never  
gone before, right  
to your door.



With our new Wheels2U shuttles, we come right to your door and then drop you off at the train platform. No more bus routes. Get the Wheels2U app and order your ride now.

For service area, hours of operation and fares, visit [Wheels2Uwestport.com](http://Wheels2Uwestport.com)



Wheels2U Westport is operated by Norwalk Transit and sponsored by Westport Transit.

Our new  
Wheels2U shuttle  
comes right  
to you when  
you order it to.

If only your dog Roxy did that.



With our new Wheels2U shuttles, we come right to your door and then drop you off at the train platform. Get the Wheels2U app and order your ride now.

For service area, hours of operation and fares, visit [Wheels2Uwestport.com](http://Wheels2Uwestport.com)

Wheels2U Westport is operated by Norwalk Transit and sponsored by Westport Transit.



We talked  
with management  
and got you  
chauffeured service  
to the train.

That corner office you requested?  
Yeah, we can't do anything  
about that.



With our new Wheels2U shuttles, we come right to your door and then drop you off at the train platform. It's like upper management just subsidized your chauffeur service. Get the Wheels2U app and order your ride now.

For service area, hours of operation and fares, visit [Wheels2Uwestport.com](http://Wheels2Uwestport.com)

Wheels2U Westport is operated by Norwalk Transit and sponsored by Westport Transit.



## Ultimate Goal

Integrate WTD's Wheels2U and door-to-door services into the Town's overall strategy for traffic, parking, bicycles, and pedestrians to help meet the Town's transportation goals and needs.



# Proposed FY22 Budget

# FY22 Budget Background

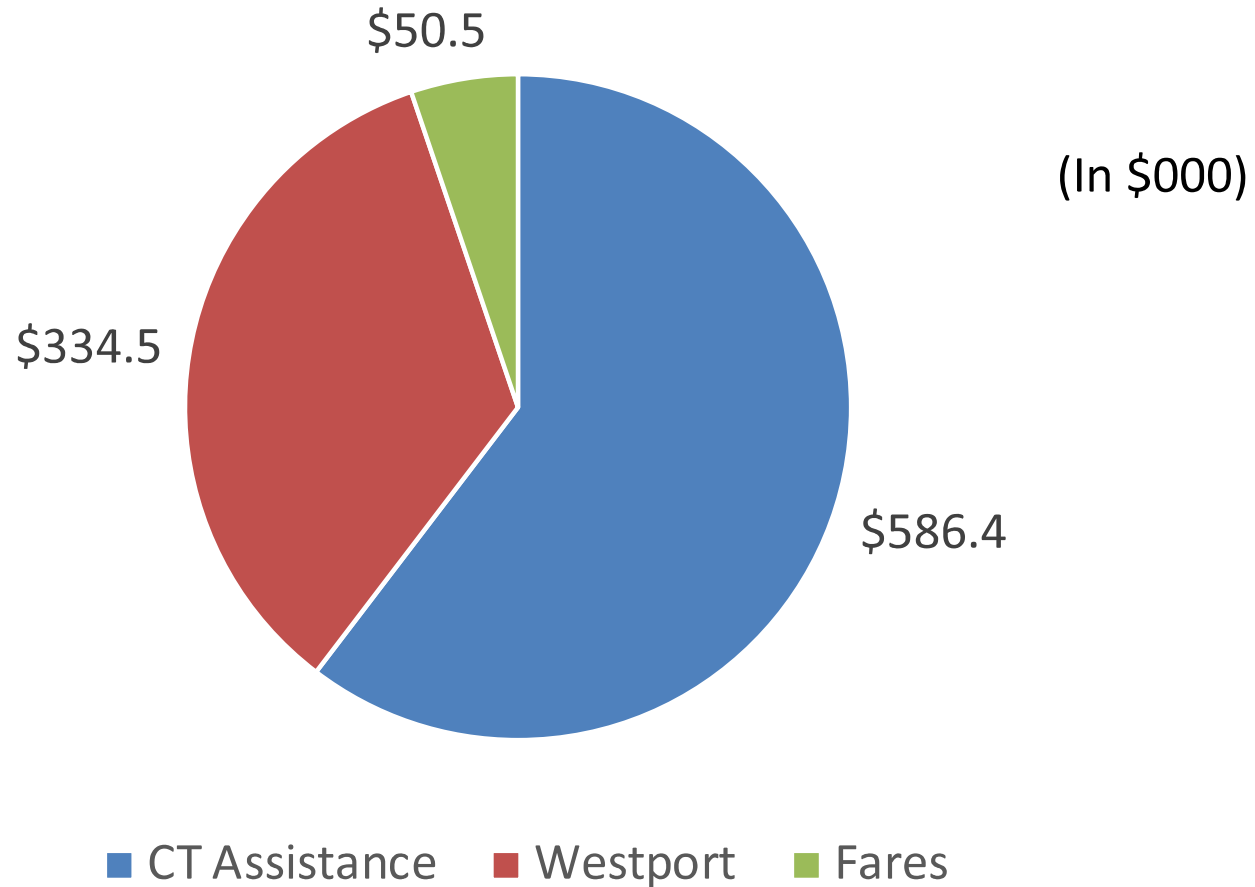
- Commuter shuttle revenues and cost structure based on new Wheels2U Westport microtransit operating model (in place only four months to date).
- Pandemic makes forecasting difficult.
  - Metro-North boardings at Saugatuck during AM service period reduced to about 6% of approximately 1,760 per day pre-pandemic level.
  - Commuter shuttle ridership is about 11% of pre-pandemic levels.
  - Wheels2U ridership has been increasing each month since October 12 launch notwithstanding more difficult pandemic conditions and reduction in Metro-North ridership.
  - Door-to-door ridership decreased as people shelter in place and postpone doctor appointments.
  - Timing of ramp up of commuting and door-to-door service is uncertain.

# Key FY 22 Budget Assumptions

- Commuter shuttle ridership of about 21,000 / year, slightly more than half of pre-pandemic level. Door-to-door ridership of 1,958, equal to FY20.
- Single ride fare increased from \$1.75 to \$2.00. Uniticket price assumed to be unchanged. Fare revenue increase will lag cost structure increase due to need to have resources in place to meet possible demand.
- Payroll costs (including benefits) / hour + 2.2% (forecast includes 8% for medical costs and 5% increase in workers' compensation). Fuel, parts and supplies, and overhead +2%.
- Cost inflation offset by reduced fuel use and maintenance expense due to change to microtransit.
- State funding formula remains unchanged.

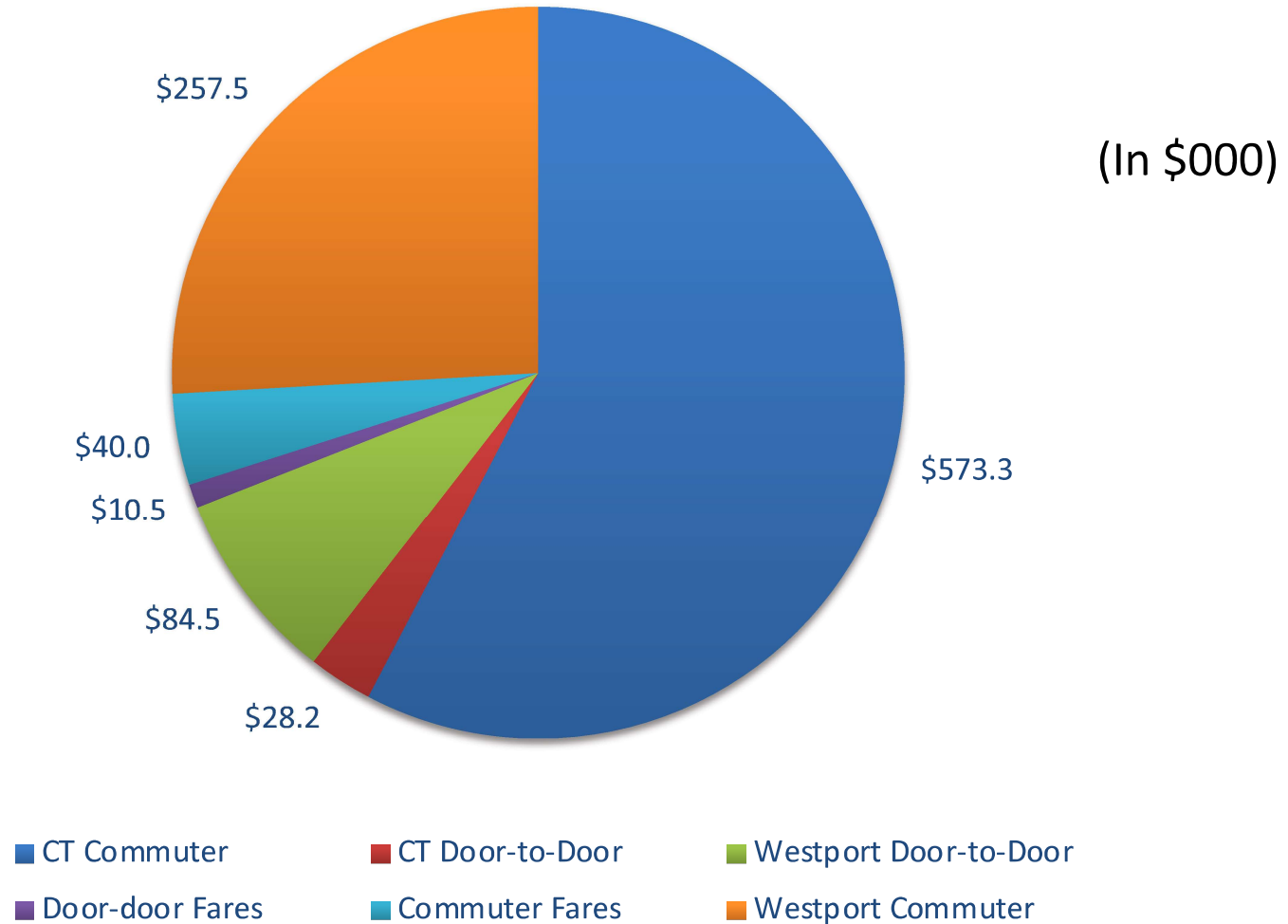
# Westport Assistance to WTD – FY22 Budget

Westport's FY22 requested assistance to the WTD is \$342,000.



Total Town funding for the WTD is less than 0.2% of the total Town budget.

# FY22 Budget Funding by Service and Source



CT Funding is \$573,300 (65.8%) of the commuter shuttle budget and \$28,200 (22.9%) of the door-to-door service budget.

# Proposed FY22 Westport Assistance to WTD

| (\$000)      | <u>FY21*</u>  |               | <u>Proposed<br/>FY22 Budget</u> |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
|              | <u>Budget</u> | <u>2/21F</u>  |                                 |
| Shuttles     | \$225.9       | \$148.3       | \$257.5                         |
| Door-to-Door | <u>\$94.5</u> | <u>\$86.3</u> | <u>\$84.5</u>                   |
| Total        | \$320.4       | \$234.6       | \$342.0                         |

\*WTD's proposed FY21 budget was \$359.0.

Town Attitudes About Commuter Shuttle Funding  
October 2018 – May 2020

## Town Attitudes About Commuter Shuttle Funding

- In July 2018 the WTD engaged Beresford Research to do a new survey to update the findings of its earlier 2016 survey to ascertain Westport resident perspectives about public transportation taking into account 2018 information.
- The survey was in the field from 10/22/18 to 11/2/18. Participation was excellent: 1,704 responses.
- Broad representative sample of Westport residents in the WTD's 2018 survey said they support Town funding of the commuter shuttles.



## October 2018 Town-Wide WTD Survey

- About 65% of Westport residents feel low-cost bus service to the train and door-to-door service for persons with disabilities is “considerably” or “extremely” valuable to the Westport community as a whole.
- Three-fifths of Westport residents (61%) “strongly” or “somewhat” agree that the commuter bus service should receive financial support from the Town of Westport given current facts and circumstances (26% disagree).

## October 2018 Town-Wide WTD Survey (cont'd)

- Should Connecticut's fiscal challenges result in a hypothetical \$100,000 reduction in state support of the bus system:
  - 40% of WTD 2018 survey respondents believe Westport should provide the additional \$100,000 of funding (total of \$325,000 of Town funding) and
  - Another 24% would support \$275,000 of funding (additional \$50,000 of funding from the FY19 \$225,000 budget level) and
  - Another 26% would support continuing the \$225,000 of funding.

Only 11% of respondents thought the commuter buses should be eliminated, while 89% supported at least \$225K funding level.

(There is no indication that such a hypothetical reduction would occur.)

## December 3, 2018 RTM Committees Meeting

- RTM Transit, Long-Range Planning and Finance Committees held a joint public meeting to discuss the commuter shuttles. Brian Stern and Nancie Dupier of the Board of Finance, Jim Marpe, First Selectman, and members of the public also participated.
- Peter Gold, Chair of RTM Transit Committee, reviewed the history of the WTD and noted that “the purpose of this meeting is to provide the BOF with a sense of what the three most relevant RTM committees feel about the continuation of the WTD commuter shuttles.”
- WTD gave a presentation about commuter shuttle operations and Beresford Research reviewed results of the 2018 WTD survey.

## December 3, 2018 RTM Committees Meeting (cont'd)

- There was a thorough discussion among the RTM members present, the BOF members present, the First Selectman and others about the benefits, challenges and opportunities of the shuttles.
- At the end of the meeting, all 13 RTM members present gave their opinions about the shuttles. While there were concerns expressed about the long-term viability of the WTD shuttles in their then current form, particularly given its reliance on uncertain funding from the State, “the general consensus was one of strong support for the WTD’s commuter shuttles.” (quote from meeting minutes)
- Please refer to the minutes of the meeting for a more detailed summary of the discussion.

## Formal FY20 Town Budget Process: March – May 2019

- On March 12, 2019, the Board of Finance cut \$115,000 from WTD's proposed FY20 Budget with the stated objective of having the RTM make a policy decision about whether the Town should continue funding the commuter shuttles. This funding reduction was affirmed by the BOF on April 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- In April 2019, the RTM Transit and RTM Finance Committees each had thorough discussions of the benefits, challenges and opportunities of the commuter shuttles and voted to recommend that the RTM restore the funding.

## Formal FY20 Town Budget Process: March – May 2019

- In April and May 2019, numerous Westport residents and organizations sent emails / letters to the RTM and spoke at the May RTM meeting to express support for restoration of the commuter shuttle funding. These organizations included the Westport Commission on People with Disabilities, Sustainable Westport, Westport Downtown Merchants Association, Westport Downtown Plan Implementation Committee, Coalition for Westport, Save Westport Now and individual realtors.
- On May 6, 2019, the RTM voted 32-0 (with one abstention) to restore the commuter shuttle funding.

## FY21 Town Budget Process

- The Board of Finance cut the WTD's requested budget by \$39,000. The WTD chose not to ask for restoration and the RTM did not vote on the issue.
- The Board of Finance expressed concern about the viability of the then current fixed route operating model.
- The WTD acted on the Board's concerns and adopted the now current Wheels2U Westport microtransit model as a more cost efficient, flexible operating model.