

Dan Hoffman ([00:00](#)):

Hello, and welcome to Part 2 of the Rouss Review--the City Works portion of the podcast. We're gonna bring in Kenny Johnson, Kenneth Johnson.

Amy Simmons ([00:09](#)):

Oh, it's just Kenny.

Dan Hoffman ([00:10](#)):

Otherwise known as Kenny.

Amy Simmons ([00:11](#)):

He's so nice.

Dan Hoffman ([00:12](#)):

Who is our Transit Operations Manager, admin?

Amy Simmons ([00:16](#)):

He just got a new role, but I don't remember what his title is.

Dan Hoffman ([00:20](#)):

Yeah. We'll ask him when he gets in here. But we're gonna talk about all things transit. We'll probably give you a quick 10-15 minute discussion about how it works, why it works, how to become a driver, the training drivers go through, and a few little ins and outs about the transit system. So let's go ahead and bring him on in.

Dan Hoffman ([00:42](#)):

Okay. And we have Kenny Johnson. Who, what's your title now, Kenny?

Kenny Johnson ([00:48](#)):

I am the Transit Supervisor for WinTran.

Dan Hoffman ([00:50](#)):

Okay. What does that mean?

Kenny Johnson ([00:53](#)):

Well, I oversee a lot of the daily operations with all the drivers, with all the daily routes, our para transit operations. In the office mainly, but I can hop in a bus if we need to and catch us up.

Dan Hoffman ([01:04](#)):

Okay.

Amy Simmons ([01:04](#)):

And has.

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Kenny Johnson ([01:05](#)):

You may see me out there once in a while.

Dan Hoffman ([01:07](#)):

So, you have your CDL.

Kenny Johnson ([01:09](#)):

Yes, I do.

Dan Hoffman ([01:09](#)):

And our buses are large enough that they require that or is it anytime you carry passengers?

Kenny Johnson ([01:15](#)):

Well, it's a little bit of both. We do require CDL class B, with the passenger endorsement for our drivers.

Dan Hoffman ([01:20](#)):

Got it. So tell me about those different levels.

Kenny Johnson ([01:24](#)):

With the class B, it's smaller buses with the gross weight being under a certain amount of weight and no trailers. As far as like Public Works, sometimes it requires a class A.

Dan Hoffman ([01:35](#)):

So a big semi truck I see in the highway, that's a class A?

Kenny Johnson ([01:38](#)):

That's gonna be a class A.

Dan Hoffman ([01:39](#)):

Class A. So, big Mac truck on the highway, class A. Class B, WinTran.

Kenny Johnson ([01:45](#)):

A lot of your buses, school buses, dump trucks. Things like that.

Dan Hoffman ([01:49](#)):

Is there a class C?

Kenny Johnson ([01:50](#)):

There is a class C for more like passenger vans and smaller vehicles that do operate like that.

Dan Hoffman ([01:56](#)):

Okay. Got it. I want to back up a little bit. How long have you been with the City?

Kenny Johnson ([02:01](#)):

I've been with the City now almost nine years. I started in public works with the Street Department. Did a quick stint in refuse and recycling, and when the position came open for transit, I jumped at it. I started in transit when I worked for the City of Harrisonburg as a driver.

Dan Hoffman ([02:15](#)):

Got it. So you've served in multiple transit roles thus far. You've been a driver, manager, now you're the transit administrator.

Kenny Johnson ([02:27](#)):

Yes. I believe we're gonna go into operations managers' modified role, now. I'm moving up and taking a little more responsibility, but it does help that I've been involved in all those roles. I think I can relate to the drivers. I see a lot of the daily interaction and the problems that may arise during the day. So, it does give me a better understanding of what's what's going on out there.

Dan Hoffman ([02:47](#)):

Got it. So, tell me, what's the biggest challenge facing transit systems in general, especially for a jurisdiction to our size. We're just shy of 30,000 people. We don't have fixed rail. We don't have a Metro system or a subway system. We're way too small for that. We don't even have the large transit buses, like you might see in a big city. So, for somebody about our size, what's the biggest challenge?

Kenny Johnson ([03:16](#)):

I think because we do have a smaller fleet in a smaller area. It's very important that we keep up with the maintenance, which is vital to the buses as far as the daily cleaning, especially now with all the COVID-related restrictions and policies that we put in the place. Just keeping a good rotation that way we have the buses on the road and serving, being on schedule, being on time, because we do have a longer turnaround than some other larger cities may have because we do split our routes up into north end and the south end routes. So just making sure we keep the buses on the road and have all the drivers in and scheduled appropriately to get people transferred to other buses whenever they need to transfer.

Dan Hoffman ([03:54](#)):

You reference the time in between buses, the headways. What dictates the headways between buses, cuz ours is about how long between buses.

Kenny Johnson ([04:08](#)):

We service a bus stop every hour and 10 minutes. That is basically just to give them enough time to have that layover, to allow for delays detours. Once they get back from a north end route, they will down here at Boscawen Street at our transfer station. Okay. There, if any passengers have caught the bus on the north end, they can transfer to a bus, maybe going in a different direction on the south end if they need to go to a different area of town.

Dan Hoffman ([04:33](#)):

So how do we determine where the routes are? We've our routes, how many different routes we have in the city?

Kenny Johnson ([04:39](#)):

We have seven different routes. Three on the north end with one of those being a split route. One route, will go to Sunnyside. The next time it goes to the north end, it will go towards the Salvation Army. And we have three routes on the south end. Those routes were already in place when I got here. I'm not sure the determination of where the routes were going. We try to hit all the major entry points to the city. Of course, the major shopping areas, the medical offices out on Amherst Street.

Dan Hoffman ([05:03](#)):

Yeah. If a resident comes to us and says, 'Hey, we should have a bus stop over here at this shopping center,' and we wanna take a look at that and determine if it's feasible. What steps do we take?

Kenny Johnson ([05:16](#)):

I know there are some ways that we can add or remove bus stops. I'm really not getting into all that in my position, right now. Maybe something down the road, but I know we try to hit all the heavily populated areas, where people are using the bus and kind of keep an eye on where we do need more bus stops.

Dan Hoffman ([05:35](#)):

Got it.

Kenny Johnson ([05:35](#)):

Because we do have routes where that's our focus, where we're getting the most ridership.

Dan Hoffman ([05:42](#)):

What's our biggest route?

Kenny Johnson ([05:44](#)):

Our most ridership is the Apple Blossom Mall route, which services Pleasant Valley Road, Walmart, the mall. And also Berryville Avenue is one of our heavy, heavy routes. A lot of apartment complexes over there. We hit a lot of cross streets where people catch the bus and transfer out to Apple Blossom Mall from that route.

Dan Hoffman ([06:03](#)):

How often do we get a disruption on a bus that means 'we gotta pull over.' What protocols does a bus driver follow if someone's creating a problem on a bus?

Kenny Johnson ([06:13](#)):

Well, if there's a safety concern or issue with a passenger, we do pull over and address that immediately. Doesn't happen very often. A lot of our riders ride daily, ride very frequently and have a good rapport with our drivers. The drivers can anticipate where something may arise, and they try to address that before they leave the transfer station, and get out on the road. But our drivers are very proactive about being alert and being aware.

Dan Hoffman ([06:37](#)):

Got it. What's the average tenure for our drivers?

Kenny Johnson ([06:41](#)):

We have really good retention and a good tenure. I think in our department, in public services, I would have to brag on that a little bit. We have drivers that have been here 14, 15, 17 years. We have a new driver that just started, but before him, our newest driver was two years.

Dan Hoffman ([06:58](#)):

Oh, wow.

Amy Simmons ([06:58](#)):

That's awesome.

Dan Hoffman ([06:59](#)):

Yeah, that's really good. But it's surprising, cuz it's getting harder and harder to retain drivers. I mean, people with the CDL are pretty high demand. So what do you attribute that to?

Kenny Johnson ([07:11](#)):

Well in our department, a lot of our drivers have had previous jobs. This is kind of their second leg of their career. I think once they're comfortable in an area, we do have a good retention in that aspect.

Dan Hoffman ([07:26](#)):

Got It.

Amy Simmons ([07:26](#)):

And we've talked about how working here is like a big family, too. I know you and Renee were taking care of everybody.

Dan Hoffman ([07:32](#)):

It's a great team. If someone has something come up, they need to switch a route or switch a shift, people jump right in there. It's a great team. They all care about each other and just one big happy family.

Dan Hoffman ([07:42](#)):

Awesome. So tell me about the vehicles we have currently. I mentioned earlier, we don't have that full size city bus that you might see in DC or another major city. We have a particular type of bus. What type of bus do we have?

Kenny Johnson ([08:02](#)):

We do. They refer to those as low floor buses.

Dan Hoffman ([08:04](#)):

Low floor buses.

Kenny Johnson ([08:05](#)):

Arboc makes those. It's a transition from what WinTran used to use, which had the lifts in the rear of the bus. So if a driver would approach a stop and someone would need the lift, maybe for a mobility device or a walker or someone that has a cart or something from shopping, they [the driver] would have to get out of the bus, make sure they position that bus in the correct spot to walk around to get that passenger on the bus. Now, with these low floor buses, we have ramps. The driver can stay in the seat, hit a button, the ramp goes out to the curb. Passenger has much more ease of access on the bus, which is easier getting around town and the tight spot we're in with these smaller buses. Plus with our ridership, it fits perfectly with what we have. We have five buses that we keep in rotation on our fixed rounds and our paratransit. We have four, and of course, we have the trolley service as well.

Dan Hoffman ([08:51](#)):

Let's talk about para-transit for a second. So, what are our responsibilities? I know the Federal government plays a big role in all transit, but how does para-transit work? Cause a lot of people, they see our buses, but they don't often see the para-transit side of it. How does that work?

Kenny Johnson ([09:09](#)):

Right. And sometimes people will mistake the para-transit buses for the fix route. There just a little bit smaller, but they're the same color schemes, same design. Paratransit is a complimentary service to our fixed routes for people that may have limited mobility or some of our elderly passengers that live a little bit further away from a bus stop than they're able to get to. So this is an application process that you would go through. We have an application process that we can mail or it's on the website. There's a portion where their doctor will fill out and acknowledge some areas of limitation for them. We can approve or deny based on their doctor's referral. And once they're signed up for para-transit, it's basically, a bus taxi service. They call within 24 hours of the night before. Some people set up for the month if they're regular users. We have a lot of regular riders on para-transit as well.

Dan Hoffman ([10:01](#)):

Okay. So, we pick them up at their house and we take 'em to their destination, right?

Kenny Johnson ([10:07](#)):

It's a curb to curb service. So their house to their destination, whether it be a doctor, whether it be shopping, whether it be going to a relative or friend's house.

Amy Simmons ([10:15](#)):

Or work. Yeah. People also use it for work.

Kenny Johnson ([10:17](#)):

Yes, they do.

Dan Hoffman ([10:18](#)):

Wow. Let's talk about money for a minute. Cuz a lot of people might think that the City covers all these costs, but para-transit, that's entirely covered by the Federal government. We are required to do it. So, what are the limitations and restrictions there? We can't just...a lot of times people say, 'oh, well, run this route out into the county because there's the shopping center out in the county and people need to

get to and from work there.' Well, it's outside of our jurisdiction. How does the funding work in those situations?

Kenny Johnson ([10:53](#)):

Right. Well, like you said, we are federally funded, and we have a lot of those guidelines and policies that we have to follow. With our jurisdiction, where we operate, we're allowed to go three quarters of a mile past our last bus stop.

Dan Hoffman ([11:04](#)):

Okay.

Kenny Johnson ([11:04](#)):

So that does take us into the county in some areas, slightly. But, like you said, we do have some requests that want us to go to the Gateway Plaza on Route 7. That's just out of our jurisdiction. But if anyone calls with questions about this stop, or if we can get to here or get to there, we always do our research, and sometimes, I'll have to go out and drive just to verify the mileage. Cause it's real tight in some areas where it's right at that three quarters.

Dan Hoffman ([11:29](#)):

Gotcha. Now we're planning a new route down to Laurel Ridge Community College (formerly LFCC). It's kind of an express route cuz it goes...Do we know where it's gonna pick up yet?

Kenny Johnson ([11:42](#)):

No, I'm unsure of that. I don't know if we're gonna be going down the interstate going down Route 11, but it is gonna be a good service to get out to the community college from the city here.

Dan Hoffman ([11:51](#)):

That's kind of what's dictating our choice of route, is that para-transit requirement. Cuz it has to be anything within three quarters of a mile of a stop, correct?

Kenny Johnson ([12:00](#)):

Correct.

Dan Hoffman ([12:01](#)):

So, when people say, 'well just run the bus down Route 11 so it can pick up more people.' Well, if the county wanted to contribute to that, then I think we'd be all for it. But this is funding given to the City by the feds to operate the service.

Kenny Johnson ([12:16](#)):

Right. And that allocates the amount of buses and the amount of drivers that we have. If we would extend into those areas, we'd service a much larger area and we would need more para-transit buses, more fixed route drivers because the hours and the demand of vehicles, we would not be able to.

Dan Hoffman ([12:32](#)):

Got it. So if someone showed up and wanted to be a driver, what steps do we take? What's the process look like for hiring a driver?

Kenny Johnson ([12:41](#)):

Like I said, we do require a class B CDL with passenger endorsement. Once we go through our interview process and if you are the selected candidate, we put you through a training program. It has been me in the past first week. We'll go out and ride all the routes, kind of just let everybody get a big picture of where we go, where the transfers are. Do a little bit of para-transit riding, as well to see how that works. Cuz we do have some people that come from school bus backgrounds that aren't a little familiar with transit. We have some people that have been in delivery service driving for us. But it helps if you do have a transit background.

Dan Hoffman ([13:14](#)):

Yeah.

Kenny Johnson ([13:15](#)):

Some people love transit. Some people just don't fully grasp it until they get out there and drive it. But once we get out on the routes, then you'll be paired up with one of our senior drivers, and they'll ride with them. They'll be doing the driving. If they have any questions, the driver is on the bus with them to help navigate or ask any questions they may have along the way.

Dan Hoffman ([13:35](#)):

But you have to come to us with that CDL.

Kenny Johnson ([13:38](#)):

Correct. We do not currently do any CDL training.

Dan Hoffman ([13:41](#)):

Gotcha. Then there's, I'm assuming there's background check.

Kenny Johnson ([13:45](#)):

Yes.

Amy Simmons ([13:45](#)):

We do that for everybody.

Dan Hoffman ([13:47](#)):

Drug tests. There's Federal rules that apply to our transit employees that don't apply to the rest of staff.

Kenny Johnson ([13:56](#)):

Right. We do require the DOT physical drug and alcohol screening program and the random testing pool that they're required to be in once they're a driver.

Dan Hoffman ([14:03](#)):

Got it.

Amy Simmons ([14:05](#)):

I wanna talk about the trolley.

Dan Hoffman ([14:06](#)):

Yes.

Amy Simmons ([14:07](#)):

We have two trolleys. One for transit, one not for transit, right?

Kenny Johnson ([14:10](#)):

Correct.

Dan Hoffman ([14:11](#)):

Yeah. One just got transferred over to parks?

Amy Simmons ([14:13](#)):

Tourism.

Dan Hoffman ([14:14](#)):

Yes. That's right.

Amy Simmons ([14:16](#)):

Yeah. So the one that's not tourism, what do we use it for?

Kenny Johnson ([14:19](#)):

We have a designated trolley route. It services mainly the south end of town where the major shopping areas are. It takes a little leg off Valley Avenue to go down Harvest Drive to service an area that our fixed routes do not currently service. Then, we go out a little bit farther down on Pleasant Valley, down by Target and Michaels, Red Lobster, all those places to eat and places to shop. It's a little bit longer of a route. It doesn't do the split routes like our fixed routes do. So, it's a longer one big loop around, but it still does intersect our fixed route. It will be at Walmart a little ahead or a little behind our Apple Blossom Mall route. Sometimes if that bus is a little full, some people will elect to take the trolley just to have a little more breathing room, especially during COVID.

Amy Simmons ([15:04](#)):

Why do we have the trolley? Why does it look different than the rest?

Kenny Johnson ([15:08](#)):

Well, it it looks like a trolley, but it acts like a bus. Everything is built the same as a bus except for the rear lift, opposed to the low floor buses that we have.

Amy Simmons ([15:17](#)):

Is it just for fun?

Kenny Johnson ([15:18](#)):

I guess it's just for fun. A lot of people like seeing the trolley. all the kids like waving to the trolley drivers. It's a good curb appeal for the city.

Dan Hoffman ([15:26](#)):

Right now you can ride fare free. A lot of jurisdictions are looking at fare free. We went fare free about...was it last summer?

Amy Simmons ([15:36](#)):

I think it was last year. Yeah. Through 2023, June.

Dan Hoffman ([15:39](#)):

Yeah. So, right now, you can ride WinTran fare free. Have we seen a pretty big uptick in ridership?

Kenny Johnson ([15:45](#)):

Our ridership numbers are pretty much back to where they were pre-COVID.

Dan Hoffman ([15:48](#)):

Great.

Kenny Johnson ([15:49](#)):

We're back to business as usual, pretty much now, as far as we were before 2020.

Amy Simmons ([15:55](#)):

Do we still require mask on the bus?

Kenny Johnson ([15:56](#)):

They are required for our drivers and our passengers to wear while they're on the bus. I think that is in place right now through March 18th [2020]. And whether that gets extended or released that day is uncertain,

Amy Simmons ([16:08](#)):

Yeah. We don't know yet.

Kenny Johnson ([16:09](#)):

But people are pretty used to the mask at this point. What hurts us is when other places start lifting the mask, and then, people don't have them with them. So, we're giving out a lot more masks. People put up a little more resistance, but it's only a 20-30 minute ride.

Amy Simmons ([16:25](#)):

And it's not our decision. This is a Federal mandate.

Kenny Johnson ([16:28](#)):

It's not on us.

Dan Hoffman ([16:28](#)):

And we have a tremendous amount of masks. So we have no shortage of masks.

Kenny Johnson ([16:33](#)):

My office has a shelf full of them.

Dan Hoffman ([16:36](#)):

Yep. We are about to start doing something new. And that is, we're gonna start running on holidays. Have they talked to you about that yet?

Amy Simmons ([16:47](#)):

Oh really?

Kenny Johnson ([16:47](#)):

I've heard that.

Dan Hoffman ([16:48](#)):

Oh, you've heard it. Good. I'm not breaking new news.

Amy Simmons ([16:52](#)):

Latest news.

Dan Hoffman ([16:53](#)):

It got there. Yeah. So we're gonna start running. We normally do not run on holidays

Amy Simmons ([16:58](#)):

Or Sundays, right?

Dan Hoffman ([16:59](#)):

Or, yeah, Sundays.

Kenny Johnson ([17:00](#)):

Right. We just run Monday through Saturday.

Dan Hoffman ([17:02](#)):

Monday through Saturday.

Amy Simmons ([17:04](#)):

Just talking holidays.

Dan Hoffman ([17:05](#)):

Yep. We're gonna start doing kind of the minor holidays where most places are still open. For example, President's Day, a lot of businesses are still open. I mean pretty much every auto dealership and furniture store in the world is open on President's Day for the President's Day sale. And a lot of, a lot of our folks work in retail, they work in the service industry. Because they rely on it to get to work, those are crummy days when all of a sudden they gotta figure out a different way to get to the office or to get to their work. So minor holidays, we're gonna start running. We'll still close down Christmas Day and Thanksgiving, but some of the minor ones...

Kenny Johnson ([17:49](#)):

Right. And a lot of those minor holidays catch people off guard. We put out our information, but some of our elderly passengers and some of our passengers that are just used to that daily routine, you know, all of a sudden that Monday rolls around, they forget about that. Doctors appointments, a lot of people have the doctor's appointments scheduled on those days and they have to kind of rearrange. So it be a big benefit to the passengers.

Amy Simmons ([18:11](#)):

That's right. And speaking of letting people know, Kenny and I both send out texts, emails, and phone calls when the transit schedule changes through our notification system. So, if you decide to start riding or if you are riding and you're not signed up for that, please do, because we'll let you know when the schedule changes for weather or for those holidays.

Kenny Johnson ([18:29](#)):

Right. It's a great benefit. Or sometimes, if we have a water break or something like that pop up, we'll send the notification about. We may have to detour one of our routes or we may be on a little bit delay. We can get that information out. The more people that ride the bus that are on that system are in the know.

Dan Hoffman ([18:47](#)):

Yeah. How do folks find out about the routes? Do we have an app or is it on the website? How do folks find out about our routes?

Kenny Johnson ([18:56](#)):

Everything's on the website. We also have schedules that we hand out on the bus if the passenger requests that or requires that.

Amy Simmons ([19:03](#)):

It's here at City Hall, too.

Kenny Johnson ([19:04](#)):

We have an open line, direct transit line that people can call if they're at a stop and they're unsure what time the bus arrives.

Dan Hoffman ([19:11](#)):

Got it. All right. Well, Kenny, thanks for coming in. Thanks for chatting us. Any anything we missed? Anything about transit that we need to...

Amy Simmons ([19:20](#)):

Any burning questions we forgot to ask?

Dan Hoffman ([19:22](#)):

Burning questions. We talked about how to become a driver, how it operates, the money.

Amy Simmons ([19:27](#)):

What's the biggest question you get besides where's the route go?

Kenny Johnson ([19:32](#)):

Probably, did I miss the bus or is the bus coming? Is the bus late? We're just there if someone calls just to verify. A lot of times, it's just a minor confusion or like I said, there's para-transit buses. They'll be waving the para-transit bus down. The driver will try to tell 'em 'no, it's not me.'

Amy Simmons ([19:47](#)):

We need to do a video on how to read that darn bus schedule though. It's difficult, for me anyway.
<Laughs>

Dan Hoffman ([19:53](#)):

We'll be making some enhancements to that in the future.

Kenny Johnson ([19:57](#)):

For someone that isn't used to transit or doesn't ride daily, it can be a little bit of an intimidating undertaking to start using transit. We wanna try and make that more friendly and more available to people just to hop on and go.

Dan Hoffman ([20:08](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. All right, Kenny, thanks for joining us. And if anybody's interested in riding WinTran, you can do it for free between now and June of 2023?

Amy Simmons ([20:18](#)):

That's right.

Dan Hoffman ([20:19](#)):

And if you wanna find out where it goes, just go to WinchesterVA.gov. Thanks a lot, Kenny.

Kenny Johnson ([20:23](#)):

Thanks for having me.

Dan Hoffman ([20:31](#)):

All right. So there you go. Another very nice, polite, professional City employee. We kind of alluded to this a little bit in the interview, but I would keep an eye on, for city residents, keep an eye on WinTran over the next year or two. There are gonna be some pretty significant changes to really modernize a lot of how the fleet operates. Technology is really disrupting and changing the way people move around. So, I think in the next year or two you're gonna see a lot of different enhancements, changes to make WinTran more convenient, more realistic for people to use it, to incorporate it into their daily schedule, daily life. Right now, like you heard Kenny say an hour and 10 minutes, if you missed that bus, you're waiting another hour and 10 minutes. Well, it's not real realistic for a lot of people. So, we're gonna be taking a lot of lessons from other jurisdictions from even private companies like Uber and Lyft to try to model a transit system that really reflects the true day to day experience of somebody who needs to rely on public transit or just wants to be a rider of choice. And you use it occasionally to either get to to get to the park or to go grocery shopping, things like that.

Amy Simmons ([21:54](#)):

Those minor holidays will make a big difference too. Even if you're off, you can still use transit to go to the park or go shopping and do other things other than just go to work. So, that's gonna make a big difference for a lot of people.

Dan Hoffman ([22:05](#)):

Absolutely. So thank you for listening into this edition of the Rouss Review--City Works. Next time, we're gonna talk about taxes. Why you pay them what they fund, and some of the ins and outs of how that works. Especially important since we're in the middle of preparing the City's budget for next year.

Amy Simmons ([22:26](#)):

Tax season's right around the corner.

Dan Hoffman ([22:27](#)):

Tax season's right around the corner. So if you wanna hear about how taxes work in a local jurisdiction tune on in. Until then, we'll see you around City Hall.