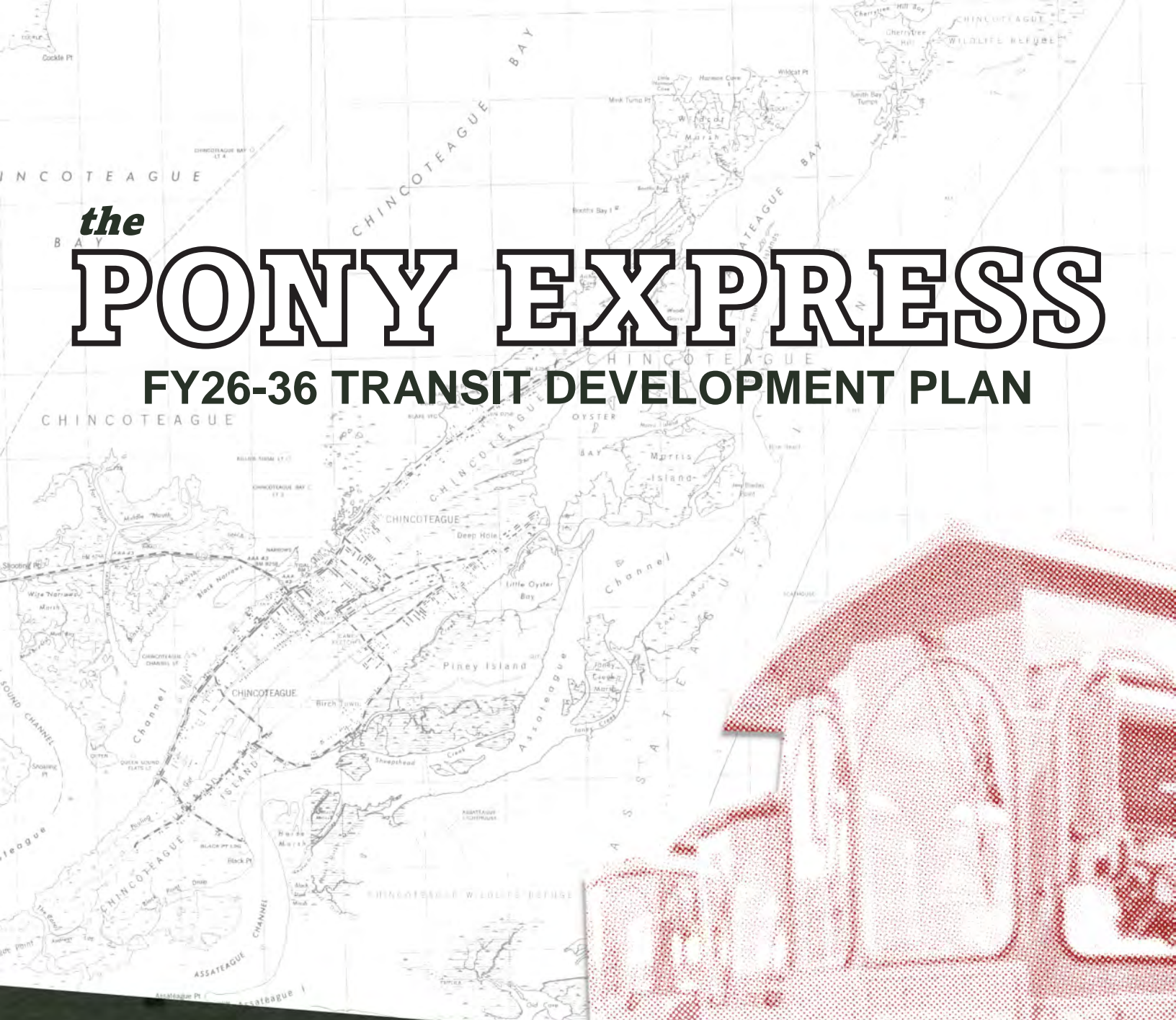


the PONY EXPRESS

FY26-36 TRANSIT DEVELOPMENT PLAN



November 2025

Prepared for the **Town of Chincoteague**
by the **Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation**



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Approval Resolution

Town of Chincoteague, Inc.



RESOLUTION APPROVING AN UPDATED TRANSIT DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR THE TOWN OF CHINCOTEAGUE

WHEREAS, the Town of Chincoteague receives funding from the federal and state government for the operation of the Pony Express transit service; and,

WHEREAS, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) requires that all transit operators that receive state operating funding prepare, adopt, and submit a Transit Development Plan (TDP) every five years; and,


WHEREAS, in consultation with DRPT, the Town has prepared a TDP that meets the requirements of DRPT.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT: the Chincoteague Town Council hereby adopts the Pony Express FY26-36 Transit Development Plan,


ADOPTED by the Town Council of the Town of Chincoteague on this 03 day of November, 2025.




J. Nick Howard



Chris D. Bott



Ellen Richardson



Denise P. Bowden, Mayor

Gene W. Taylor



K. Jay Savage



William McComb Jr.



Attest: Michael T. Tolbert, Town Manager

6150 Community Drive, Chincoteague Island, Virginia 23336 (757) 336-6519

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Executive Summary

The Pony Express Transit Development Plan (TDP) provides a vision for the next ten years of transit service in Chincoteague. This plan evaluates performance and demand, identifies areas for improvement, and forecasts needs for fiscal years 2026 to 2036. This TDP is an update of the prior 2020 TDP in accordance with revised Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) guidelines from 2022, which consolidated chapters while retaining most content requirements.

The Pony Express operates a trolley on the island of Chincoteague, providing 15-minute headways daily in the summer and only on weekends during the shoulder months. Trolleys run from 5pm to 10pm and are used by residents and visitors to get around town, enjoy the coastal views, or get an ice cream after a day at the beach. The town maintained semi-regular service during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, with performance metrics continuing to return to pre-pandemic levels year over year.

The evaluation of performance data, demographics, and stakeholder engagement revealed several opportunities for improvement. These include streamlining the Pony Express' operations by combining its red and green routes into a single route, implementing timepoints, clarifying fare policies, and increasing headways to every 20 minutes to ensure reliable and predictable service. The plan also recommends implementing real-time vehicle tracking technology, regular replacements of passenger amenities, and proposes extending service to start earlier in the afternoon. Planned service improvements are further described in chapter 3.

Estimated costs and timing are provided in chapters 4 and 5. Proposed projects are expected to attract new riders through targeted operational improvements and capital investments by making the service easier to understand, more reliable, and more appealing as a transportation choice. Using current ridership rates, all projects combined are estimated to add approximately 6,000 additional riders each year. The Pony Express could be further supported through collaboration and community partnerships to meet people's transportation needs, support the town's tourism industry, and provide another transportation option in town.

Chapter 1: System Overview

1.1 System Overview

The Pony Express is a seasonal bus service operated by the Town of Chincoteague in Accomack County on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Incorporated in 1908, the town was only accessible by boat until a causeway from the mainland was completed in 1922. The Pony Express is named after the town's most popular attraction, a herd of ponies that live on neighboring Assateague Island. After two devastating fires early in the town's history, ponies began to be herded across the channel to be auctioned to support Chincoteague's volunteer fire department. The Pony Swim soon attracted spectators and was popularized after the publication of Marguerite Henry's children's novel *Misty of Chincoteague* in 1946. A new road connected Chincoteague to Assateague's beach in 1962, further contributing to the town's economic shift from fishing to tourism.

1.1.1 Services Provided and Areas Served

The Pony Express is a deviated fixed-route service operating across the entire 9.3 square mile island of Chincoteague, from Curtis Merritt Harbor in the south to Pine Grove Campground in the north. The service uses vintage-style trolleys in lieu of traditional buses to support the town's historic nature.

As shown in **Exhibit 1**, the service operates counterclockwise beginning at the Municipal Complex, turning right onto Maddox Boulevard and left onto Main Street before reaching Curtis Merritt Harbor at the southwest end of the island. The trolley then returns north up Ridge Road, following the coast on East Side Drive before turning right onto Maddox Boulevard and turning around at the entrance of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. The trolley then returns to the Municipal Complex via Chicken City Road. The entire run is scheduled to take approximately 30 minutes, delivering a 15-minute headway when operating two vehicles. Trolleys will deviate to several locations upon request, including Pine Grove Campground and Chincoteague High School.

Service Schedule

The Pony Express operates two similar routes with slight deviations. The green and red routes operate seasonally for a total of 89 days each year: daily in July and August and only weekends in May, June, September, and October. Trolleys operate in the evenings from 5pm to 10pm. A timetable for both routes is shown in **Exhibit 2**.

Vehicles

The Pony Express maintains four federally-funded vehicles, three trolleys for its normal service and an ADA-accessible minivan for complementary paratransit trips. Only two trolleys are in service during normal operations while the third is used as a spare and to meet any additional needs during days with seasonal events like the Pony Swim. A list of vehicles in the Pony Express' fleet is shown in **Exhibit 3**.

Exhibit 1: Chincoteague Transit Reference Map



Pony Express FY26-36 Transit Development Plan

Exhibit 2. Pony Express Trolley Schedule

GREEN ROUTE START 5:00PM - PRIMARY											RED ROUTE START 5:15PM - VARIABLE										
Pine Grove	5:02		6:02		7:02		8:02		9:02		Community Center	5:15	6:15	7:15	8:15	9:15					
Maddox Blvd. & Deep Hole Rd.	5:05	5:35	6:05	6:35	7:05	7:35	8:05	8:35	9:05	9:35	High School - Call In (757) 854-8570	5:18	6:18	7:18	8:18	9:18					
Main St. & Church St.	5:08	5:38	6:08	6:38	7:08	7:38	8:08	8:38	9:08	9:38	Main St. & Church St.	5:22	6:22	7:22	8:22	9:22					
Beebe Rd. & Ridge Rd.	5:13	5:43	6:13	6:43	7:13	7:43	8:13	8:43	9:13	9:43	Curtis Merritt Harbor - Call In (757) 854-8570	6:00	7:00	8:00	9:00	10:00					
Veterans' Memorial Park	5:17	5:47	6:17	6:47	7:17	7:47	8:17	8:47	9:17	9:47	Beebe Rd. & Ridge Rd.	6:40	7:40	8:40	9:40						
Pony Centre	5:21	5:51	6:21	6:51	7:21	7:51	8:21	8:51	9:21	9:51	Veterans' Memorial Park	6:45	7:45	8:45	9:45						
Museum of Chincoteague	5:25	5:55	6:25	6:55	7:25	7:55	8:25	8:55	9:25	9:55	Museum of Chincoteague	6:55	7:55	8:55	9:55						

MAY							JUNE							JULY							AUGUST							SEPTEMBER							OCTOBER												
SU	MO	TU	WE	TH	FR	SA	SU	MO	TU	WE	TH	FR	SA	SU	MO	TU	WE	TH	FR	SA	SU	MO	TU	WE	TH	FR	SA	SU	MO	TU	WE	TH	FR	SA	SU	MO	TU	WE	TH	FR	SA						
					1	2	3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	5	6	7	8	9	10	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	5	6	7	8	9	10	11						
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	12	13	14	15	16	17	18						
18	19	20	21	22	23	24	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	19	20	21	22	23	24	25						
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	29	30	27	28	29	30	31	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	28	29	30	26	27	28	29	30	31																		

Source: 2025 Pony Express Brochure

Exhibit 3. Pony Express Fleet Details

TransAM ID	Vehicle Name	Year	Make/Model	Capacity
248200L	<i>Thunder</i>	2023	Ford Trolley Conversion	28
179717L	<i>Surfer Dude</i>	2017	Dodge Caravan	2
150630L	<i>Stormy</i>	2015	Ford Trolley Conversion	28
10978	<i>Misty</i>	2011	Ford Trolley Conversion	28

Source: TransAM

Connections

The Pony Express has a single one-direction transfer from another fixed-route transit service. On weekdays in July and August, riders taking STAR Transit's Silver Route from the Oak Hall Food Lion can transfer onto the Pony Express at the Chincoteague Municipal Complex at 4:55pm. STAR Transit's paratransit service area is also available for eligible users in Chincoteague and overlaps with much of the Pony Express' paratransit service area.

Stops, Fares, and Service Notes

The Pony Express has 18 signed stops but will also pick up passengers that wave the trolley down at any point along the route. Several stops include benches or a custom shelter. Fares are \$0.50 and paid manually through the farebox with two quarters or one token. Tokens are produced by the town and distributed to the town hall, Chamber of Commerce, and local businesses. On select days with special events, the trolley operates fare-free underwritten by the Chamber of Commerce.

Paratransit

As required by the Americans with Disabilities Act, FTA circulars, US Code, and in accordance with the certifications and assurances of the Federal Transit Administration, the town maintains an accessible minivan to provide paratransit trips for certified individuals with qualifying disabilities. Trips are booked by phone and have a fare of \$1.00 or four tokens. As shown in **Exhibit 1**, paratransit is provided up to ¾ mile beyond the Pony Express' fixed route, resulting in a service area that includes the entire island south of North Hibiscus Drive. Paratransit is only available while the Pony Express is operating.



Pony Express trolleys and an accessible minivan are stored at Chincoteague's municipal complex.
Source: DRPT

1.1.2 Current and Recent Initiatives

Chincoteague consistently engages in initiatives to improve the Pony Express' service. In 2025, town was awarded a MERIT Capital Assistance grant to acquire a new trolley to replace *Stormy* (TransAM ID 150630L). The Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce also recently launched a digital app and route map, [available at this link](#), to promote awareness of the service and how it can connect visitors to popular destinations. Other ongoing discussions include extending service earlier in the day, introducing a bus tracking application, and considering the feasibility of charter service or programs dependent on funding availability and restrictions.

1.2 Goals, Objectives, and Service Design Standards

The goals, objectives, and service design standards in this section are used to evaluate the Pony Express and identify areas for improvement. Goals are broad vision statements that include several objectives to achieve them. Each objective includes strategies and performance measures to track progress toward accomplishing each goal.

1.2.1 Goals and Objectives

As shown in **Exhibit 4**, the Pony Express has three goals established in prior Transit Development Plans. These goals are divided into six strategies focused on safety, asset management, data, riders, community involvement, and marketing. These goals and objectives reflect several Guiding Principles in VTrans, Virginia's Statewide Transportation Plan, including GP1: to promote safety, security, and resiliency, GP5: to ensure transparency, accountability, and promote performance management, and GP8: prioritizing maintenance first.

1.2.2 Public Outreach, Engagement, and Involvement

Chincoteague emphasizes public outreach and community involvement as core to the success of the Pony Express. In addition to the regular comment period available at town meetings, the Pony Express participates in several important community events in Chincoteague, including the Pony Swim, Pony Auction, and the Fourth of July Carnival. In addition, trolleys are used for Ride to Read and Stuff the Trolley events to raise awareness of the trolley among younger residents.

Previously, the town operated a history tour using the trolleys. Although the tour successfully engaged residents and visitors, it was discontinued in 2017 to ensure compliance with federal funding. Since then, the Museum of Chincoteague purchased a school bus to operate a similar tour. In 2025, the Pony Express also disposed an trolley aged beyond its useful life and mileage benchmarks to serve as a shuttle for special events like the Blueberry Festival or weddings at the Chincoteague Center.

Exhibit 4. Pony Express Goals, Objectives, Strategies, and Measures

Goal 1: Provide safe and reliable public transportation services	
Objective A: Promote the safety of riders and drivers	
Strategy	Measure
Continue driver training program	Number of drivers completing annual training
Objective B: Maintain fleet and equipment in a state of good repair	
Strategy	Measure
Implement an asset management plan	Asset replacements comply with best practices
Monitor breakdown frequency, types, and causes	Miles between in-service breakdowns
Maintain bus stop signage and amenities	Number of amenities due for replacement
Goal 2: Enable residents & visitors to engage in civic and social life	
Objective C: Collect and analyze data to evaluate the existing service	
Strategy	Measure
Monitor ridership levels throughout the season	Passengers per revenue vehicle hour and mile
Monitor on-time performance	Difference of start time from scheduled
Monitor system efficiency	Operating cost per VRH, VRM, per passenger
Objective D: Continuously identify service gaps and improvements	
Strategy	Measure
Engage visitors to monitor transit demand	Amount of feedback, number of riders engaged
Coordinate with other transit partners	Annual meeting with providers including STAR
Goal 3: Improve awareness of the Pony Express as a transit service	
Objective E: Create positive involvement through community events	
Strategy	Measure
Promotion at community and special events	Number of events attended
Objective F: Provide the public with current information	
Strategy	Measure
Update and distribute current maps & schedules	Number of maps & schedules distributed

Exhibit 5. Pony Express Service Design Standards

Category	Metric	Standard
Route Planning	Number of routes	Minimum necessary number of routes
Service Reliability	Vehicle start time	100% on-time start time each day
System Efficiency	Operating cost per passenger	Monitor for changes annually
	Operating cost per VRH & VRM	
Safety and Security	Safety Incidents	Zero reportable safety incidents
Customer Service	Bus Stops	No stops in need of replacement
	Route Maps and Schedules	Reviewed annually
Compliance	Completed annual training	100% of drivers complete
	Asset management	Follow best practices in TAM plan
	Performance reporting	Timely and accurate data reporting

1.2.3 Service Design Standards

Service design standards are intended to guide Chincoteague leadership in making service modifications. Although the town does not have an official set of service design standards for the Pony Express, the 2011 and 2020 TDPs outline a proposed list. This list is provided above in **Exhibit 5** with further revisions that address the current service pattern.

Chapter 2: System Evaluation

This chapter evaluates the last ten years of performance of the Pony Express to identify opportunities for improvement and collaboration. It begins by defining performance standards, uses them for a performance evaluation, assesses service area demographics and transit demand, and concludes with four opportunities for improvement. This section also includes a discussion on transit to Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and opportunities for collaboration with local organizations.

2.1 Performance Standards

Performance standards are based on historic reporting measures used by the National Transit Database. For the purposes of this document, performance standards are organized into four categories as shown below.

1) Fiscal Performance

- Operating Expenses
- Fare Revenue
- Farebox Recovery Ratio
- Federal, State, and Local Operating Contributions

2) Operational Performance

- Passenger Trips
- Revenue Hours
- Revenue Miles
- Trips per Revenue Hour
- Trips per Revenue Mile
- On-Time Performance

3) Efficiency Performance

- Operating Cost per Trip
- Operating Cost per Revenue Hour
- Operating Cost per Revenue Mile

4) Asset Performance

- Vehicle Assets
- Non-Vehicle Assets

2.2 Performance Evaluation

The following performance evaluation illustrates the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Pony Express. Performance across all categories decreased in 2020 and 2021 before starting to rebound in 2022. Prior to these extraordinary circumstances, the Pony Express maintained stable performance, experiencing only minor changes in fiscal and operating measures. Performance continues to improve post-pandemic, with measures showing continuous annual improvement.

Since Covid, efficiency measures have diverged, with cost per service hour improving faster than cost per trip. Assets continue to be maintained and replaced in a timely manner.

2.2.1 Performance Evaluation

Due to the low usage of the paratransit service (3 trips in 2024), it is not included in the evaluation. Reported values from the National Transit Database (NTD) may be in the process of revision. However, due to the small nature of the Pony Express service, any revisions are expected to have a minimal impact on the analysis and opportunities for improvement. This section begins with a review of standards used in DRPT's MERIT operating assistance allocation process.

Operating Assistance Allocation Measures

DRPT's TDP guidance requires the inclusion of the five measures utilized in the MERIT operating assistance allocation process. A ten-year retrospective of these measures is shown in **Exhibit 6** illustrating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and steady improvement toward pre-pandemic rates.

Exhibit 6. DRPT Operating Assistance Allocation Measures, 2014-2024

Year	Trips per Revenue Vehicle Hour	Trips per Revenue Vehicle Mile	Operating Cost per Revenue Vehicle Hour	Operating Cost per Revenue Vehicle Mile	Operating Cost per Trip
2014	11	0.8	\$ 56.77	\$ 4.21	\$ 5.16
2015	11.1	0.8	\$ 68.38	\$ 5.21	\$ 6.15
2016	12.9	1.2	\$ 52.33	\$ 5.00	\$ 4.06
2017	7.2	1.1	\$ 45.60	\$ 6.82	\$ 6.37
2018	8.5	1.2	\$ 52.58	\$ 7.63	\$ 6.15
2019	10.7	0.7	\$ 78.37	\$ 5.27	\$ 7.33
2020	13	0.8	\$ 87.88	\$ 5.60	\$ 6.78
2021	2.4	0.3	\$ 71.52	\$ 8.41	\$ 29.54
2022	3.4	0.4	\$ 83.49	\$ 10.84	\$ 24.48
2023	6.2	0.6	\$ 77.10	\$ 7.24	\$ 12.52
2024	1.9	0.5	\$ 32.16	\$ 8.64	\$ 16.24

Source: 2014 to 2023 data from the National Transit Database. 2024 data from the DRPT performance measures dashboard.

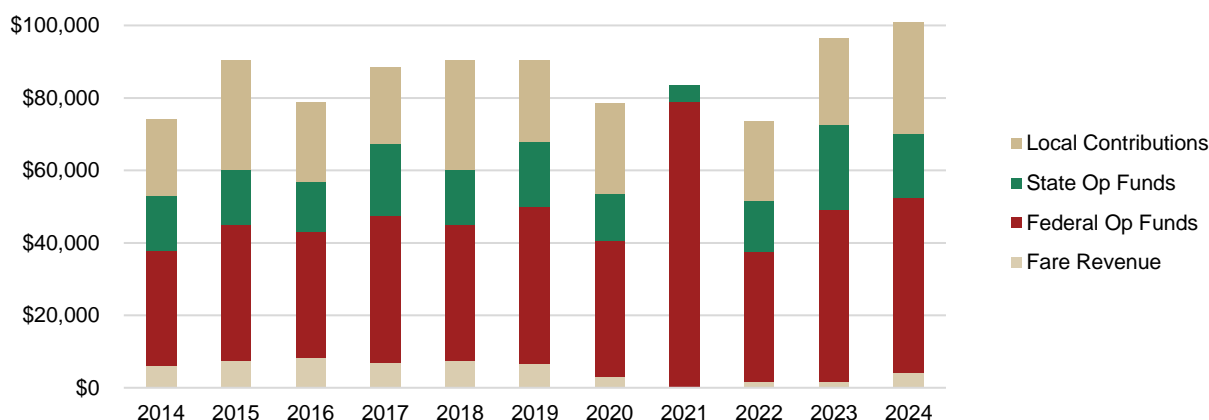
Pony Express FY26-36 Transit Development Plan

Fiscal Performance

The past ten years of fiscal performance show a 25% increase in annual operating expenses from \$74,138 to \$92,803. The pandemic years saw lower operating expenses and reduced fare revenue due to service and visitation reductions from 2020 to 2023. Operating expenses returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2025 with fare revenues yet to catch up.

The Pony Express' largest source of revenue is federal 5311 rural operating funds, providing about half of total revenue. The proportion of this source increased in 2021 due to federal stimulus in response to the pandemic. Local contributions account for approximately one third of total revenue, followed by state DRPT funding which contributed one fifth of total revenue. Fares are the smallest source of revenue, providing an average of 8% pre-covid annual total revenues.

Exhibit 7. Pony Express Operating Revenue Sources, 2014 to 2024



Source: 2014 to 2023 data from National Transit Database. 2024 data from FY24 SYIP.

Exhibit 8. Fiscal Performance Measures, 2014 to 2025

Year	Operating Expenses	Fare Revenue	Farebox Recovery	Federal Op Funds	State Op Funds	Local Contributions
2014	\$74,138	\$5,965	8.05%	\$31,923	\$15,052	\$21,198
2015	\$90,603	\$7,586	8.37%	\$37,249	\$15,391	\$30,377
2016	\$78,750	\$8,302	10.54%	\$34,573	\$13,998	\$21,877
2017	\$88,377	\$6,985	7.90%	\$40,696	\$19,541	\$21,155
2018	\$90,603	\$7,586	8.37%	\$37,249	\$15,391	\$30,377
2019	\$90,514	\$6,636	7.33%	\$43,237	\$18,159	\$22,482
2020	\$78,386	\$2,909	3.71%	\$37,739	\$12,831	\$24,907
2021	\$83,463	\$184	0.22%	\$78,646	\$4,663	\$0
2022	\$73,474	\$1,724	2.35%	\$35,875	\$13,998	\$21,877
2023	\$50,424	\$1,609	2.32%	\$47,421	\$23,547	\$23,874
2024	\$74,998	\$4,000	3.96%	\$48,481	\$17,722	\$30,758

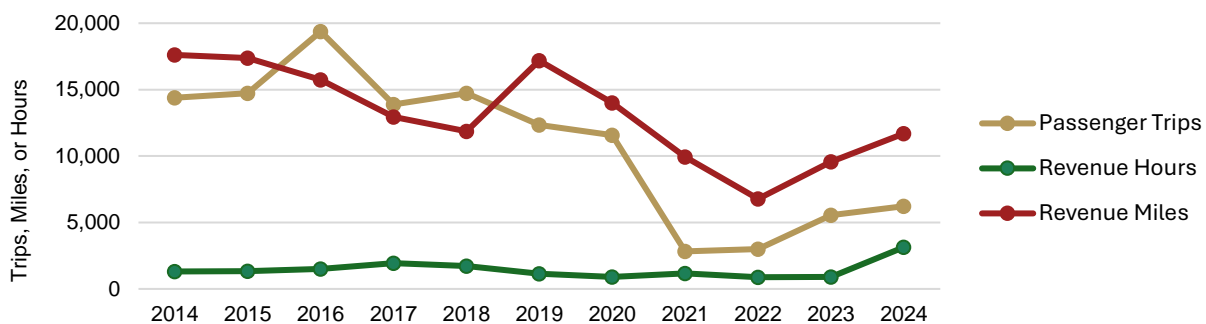
Source: 2014 to 2023 data from the National Transit Database. 2024 data from FY24 SYIP. Values are not inflation-adjusted.

Operational Performance

The Pony Express operated fewer revenue hours and miles in the pandemic years but returned to regular operations in 2024. Passenger trips in 2024 amounted to less than a third of the pre-pandemic high of 19,377 trips in 2016. Trips per revenue hour and mile measures saw the best performance in 2016 of 12.9 and 1.2, respectively. The Pony Express experienced no reportable safety events from 2014 to 2024.

Each circuit of the Pony Express is scheduled for 30 minutes with little padding or recovery time. Remix and Google Maps estimates completing the route will take approximately 34 minutes, without accounting for boarding and alighting. While on-time performance is not recorded for each run, it is known anecdotally to devolve over the course of the night due to increased vehicle congestion along Maddox Boulevard. This delay was verified during a ridership inventory analysis conducted as part of the 2020 Transit Development Plan (p. 40) which found trolleys running almost thirty minutes behind their scheduled headways toward the end of the night.

Exhibit 9. Pony Express Operational Measures, 2014 to 2024



Source: 2014 to 2023 data from the National Transit Database. 2024 data from the DRPT performance measures dashboard.

Exhibit 10. Pony Express Operational Performance Measures, 2014 to 2024

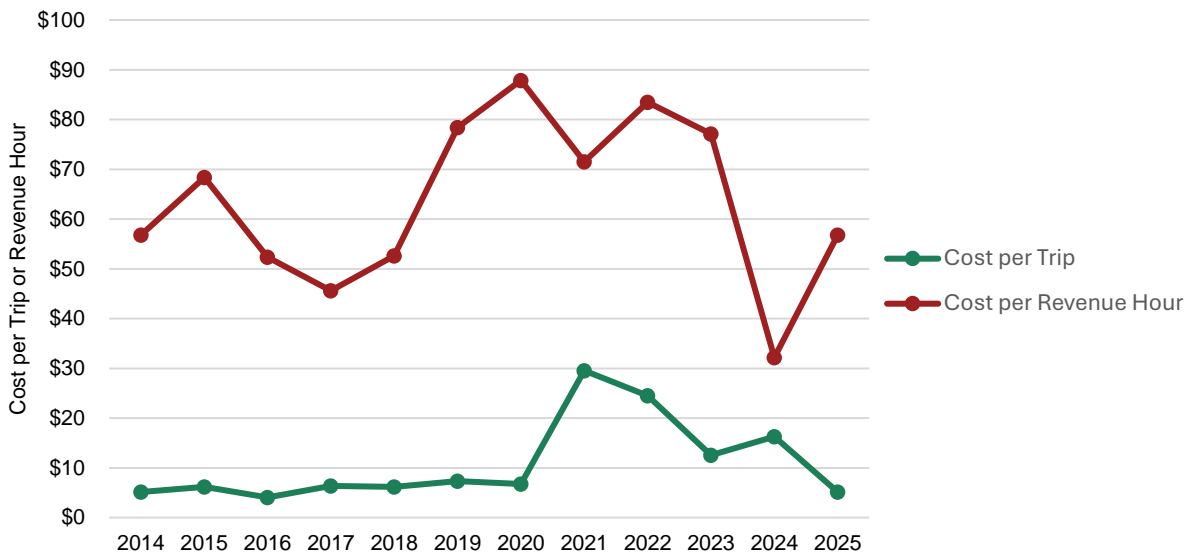
Year	Passenger Trips	Revenue Hours	Revenue Miles	Trips per Revenue Hour	Trips per Revenue Mile
2014	14,381	1,306	17,614	11	0.8
2015	14,728	1,325	17,378	11.1	0.8
2016	19,377	1,505	15,747	12.9	1.2
2017	13,884	1,938	12,957	7.2	1.1
2018	14,728	1,723	11,873	8.5	1.2
2019	12,353	1,155	17,178	10.7	0.7
2020	11,562	892	13,998	13	0.8
2021	2,825	1,167	9,930	2.4	0.3
2022	3,001	880	6,777	3.4	0.4
2023	5,543	900	9,580	6.2	0.6
2024	6,217	3,139	11,686	1.9	0.5

Source: 2014 to 2023 data from the National Transit Database. 2024 data from the DRPT performance measures dashboard.

Efficiency Performance

The Pony Express’ operating cost-per-trip was stable until the pandemic caused ridership to decline, leading it to balloon to a high of over \$29 in 2021. Since then, cost-per-trip has gradually returned to pre-pandemic levels. Cost-per-revenue hour saw a similar increase due to curtailed operating hours from 2019 to 2023 while operating expenses remained the stable.

Exhibit 11. Pony Express Efficiency Measures, 2014 to 2024



Source: 2014 to 2023 data from the National Transit Database. 2024 data from the DRPT performance measures dashboard.

Exhibit 12. Efficiency Performance Measures, 2014 to 2024

Year	Operating Cost per Trip	Operating Cost per Revenue Hour	Operating Cost Per Revenue Mile
2014	\$5.16	\$56.77	\$4.21
2015	\$6.15	\$68.38	\$5.21
2016	\$4.06	\$52.33	\$5.00
2017	\$6.37	\$45.60	\$6.82
2018	\$6.15	\$52.58	\$7.63
2019	\$7.33	\$78.37	\$5.27
2020	\$6.78	\$87.88	\$5.60
2021	\$29.54	\$71.52	\$8.41
2022	\$24.48	\$83.49	\$10.84
2023	\$12.52	\$77.10	\$7.24
2024	\$16.24	\$32.16	\$8.64

Source: 2014 to 2023 data from the National Transit Database. 2024 data from the DRPT performance measures dashboard.

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Asset Performance

Aside from their newest vehicle, all the Pony Express' fleet is at or beyond the FTA's useful life benchmarks for age. This is contrasted by their fleets relatively low mileage, with all vehicles under half their projected useful service miles. While aged, Pony Express vehicles stay in good working condition by operating low mileage each year. As seen with their 2023 and 2025 MERIT Capital Assistance grants for trolley replacements, the Pony Express will continue to retire and procure new assets as needed. Non-vehicle assets include the Municipal Complex's parking lot, where trolleys are parked when not in use, and trolley stops and signage, which are presented in **Exhibit 13**.

The Pony Express experienced no reportable breakdown events from 2014 to 2024.

Exhibit 13. Pony Express Vehicle Assets

TransAM Asset ID	VIN	Vehicle Name	Useful Life Benchmark	Year	% ULB	Useful Service Miles	Odometer	% USM
248200L	1F66F5DN4M0A15041	<i>Thunder</i>	10	2023	20%	350,000	7,603	2%
179717L	2C7WDGBG4HR5628	<i>Surfer Dude</i>	4	2017	200%	100,000	13,002	13%
150630L	1F66F5DY4F0A10242	<i>Stormy</i>	10	2015	100%	350,000	47,229	13%
10978	1F66F5DY8B0A11744	<i>Misty</i>	10	2011	140%	350,000	66,887	19%

Source: TransAM

Exhibit 14. Pony Express Stop Amenities

Stop Name	Sign	Bench	Shelter	Stop Name	Sign	Bench	Shelter
High School	Yes	No	No	Pony Centre	Yes	Yes	No
Main & Clark	Yes	No	No	Museum	Yes	No	No
Main & Church	Yes	Yes	No	Surfside Golf	Yes	No	No
Main & Cropper	Yes	Yes	No	Pine Grove Campground	Yes	No	No
Waterside	Yes	No	No	Maddox & Deep Hole	Yes	No	No
Curtis Merritt Harbor of Refuge	No	No	No	Island Creamery	Yes	No	No
Bluefin Marina	No	No	No	Tom's Cove Park	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ridge & Seaweed	No	No	No	Veteran's Memorial Park	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ridge & Seashell	No	No	No	Funland	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mr. Baldy's Restaurant	Yes	No	No	Chamber of Commerce	Yes	Yes	Yes
Snug Harbor Marina	No	No	No	Municipal Complex	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wayne Rd	Yes	No	No				

Source: Pony Express 2025 Brochure, Site Visit, Google Maps Desktop Review

2.3 Evaluation of Transit Demand & Underserved Areas

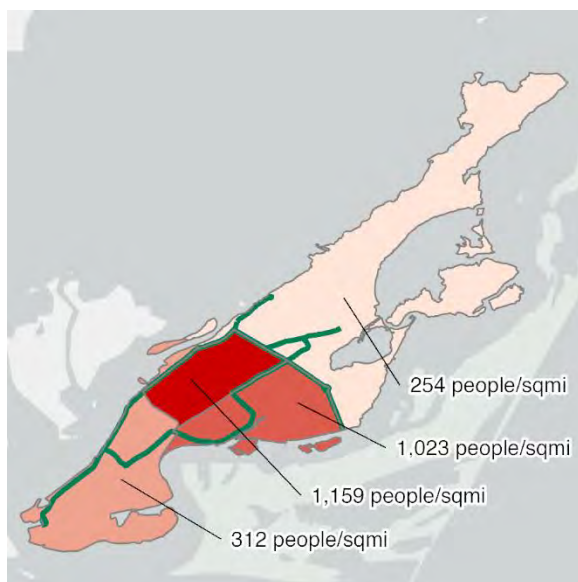
This section uses demographics and land use information to evaluate transit demand and potentially underserved areas. The evaluation begins with an overview of Chincoteague’s demographics, followed by a discussion of communities that are considered to be more likely to use transit, a review of populations protected by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and concludes with a look at the island’s seasonal population. Unless otherwise noted, this section uses 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates mapped by census block group and ‘Chincoteague’ refers to the Chincoteague Census Designated Place.

2.3.1 Transit Demand & Underserved Area Evaluation

Chincoteague has a year-round population of 3,300 across its 9.3 square miles, with an overall population density of 356 people per square mile. As shown in **Exhibit 15**, Chincoteague is densest at its core, roughly the area between Bunting Road and Maddox Boulevard. This population distribution corresponds with the town’s zoning map which places more intensive commercial uses in the middle of the island with primary commercial corridors on Main Street, Maddox Boulevard, and East Side Road. Resort uses are restricted to the southern-coastal sections of the island with the least-dense residential and resource conservation zones more common in the north.

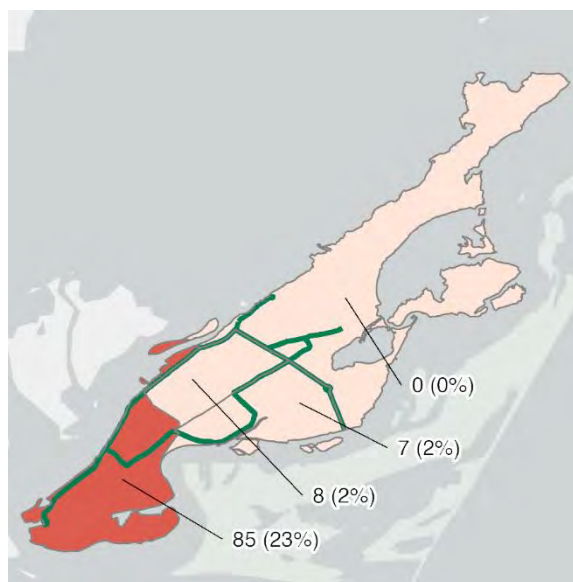
This land use distribution supports transit demand by concentrating homes, businesses, and attractions in a smaller geographic area. Relatedly, e-bikes and golf carts are popular ways to navigate the island without a car, as illustrated in Exhibit 16 showing that that all 100 households without access to a car are south of Maddox Boulevard.

Exhibit 15. Population Density



Source: ACS 2023 5-Year Estimates

Exhibit 16. Households without a Car



Source: ACS 2023 5-Year Estimates

Population Demographics

Chincoteague’s population has grown 12% in the last decade from 2,941 to 3,300. While population projections are not available for Chincoteague alone, Accomack County is projected to lose 10% of its population by 2050. While a population decline would be expected to reduce transportation demand, aging populations have been shown to increase demand for transit as people age out of driving. As shown in **Exhibit 18**, Chincoteague’s population is older and less diverse than Accomack County and Virginia as a whole. Almost half the population is not of working age (15 to 64 years old), with 40% of residents older than 65. 5% of residents reported identifying as nonwhite, all as two or more ethnic or racial groups. 1% of residents reported identifying as Hispanic or Latino. 4% of residents reported as having a disability and no residents reported having limited proficiency in English.

Exhibit 17. Historical and Projected Population, 2000 to 2050

	2000	2010	2020	2023	2030	2040	2050
Chincoteague	4,317	2,941	3,344	3,300	Projections Not Available		
Accomack	38,305	33,164	33,413	33,326	33,154	33,190	30,561

Source: U.S. Census Population Estimates. Projections from UVA Cooper Center

Exhibit 18. Select Demographics for Chincoteague, Accomack, and Virginia

	Median Age	Population < 15	Population > 65	Nonwhite Population	Hispanic or Latino Pop.	Households with Limited English Proficiency	People living with a disability
Chincoteague	57	299	1,268	166	65	0	149
Share		9%	40%	5%	1%	0%	4%
Accomack	48	5,764	8,382	13,086	3,528	1,448	2,192
Share		17%	25%	49%	11%	4%	12%
Virginia	39	1,563,237	1,410,160	3,313,324	929,140	206,083	513,773
Share		18%	16%	38%	10%	2%	10%

Source: 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Jobs and Economic Factors

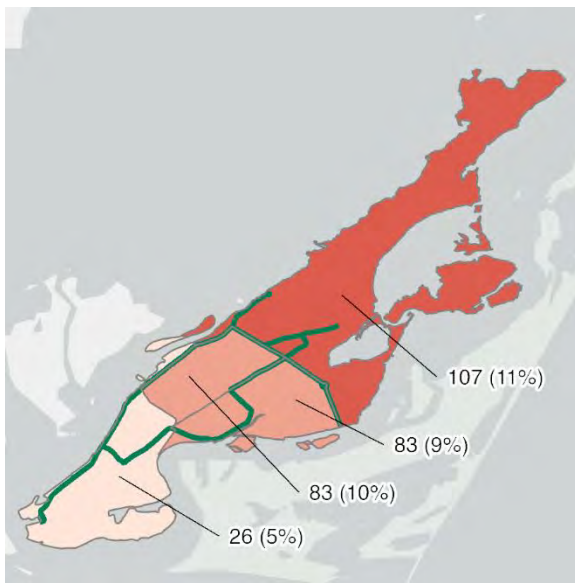
Employment projections are not available for the town, but Chincoteague has a labor force of 1,446 workers. Chincoteague’s rates of unemployment, poverty, and public assistance are higher than statewide, with double the unemployment rate but a better poverty rate than Accomack. Due to its limited schedule, the Pony Express supports the tourism economy rather than providing access to jobs.

Exhibit 19. Economic Factors for Chincoteague, Accomack, and Virginia

	Labor Force	Unemployment Rate	Poverty Rate	Households on Public Assistance
Chincoteague	1,446	7.60%	7.14%	56 (3.2%)
Accomack	15,349	3.75%	10.18%	194 (1.4%)
Virginia	4,580,910	4.17%	6.80%	73,653 (2.2%)

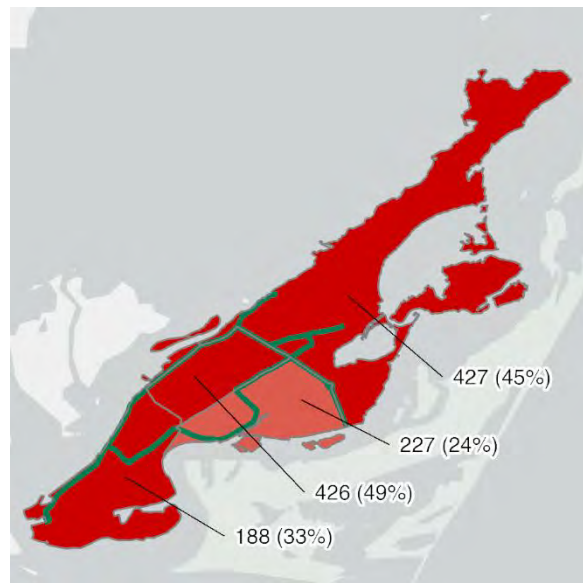
Source: 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Exhibit 20. Residents younger than 15



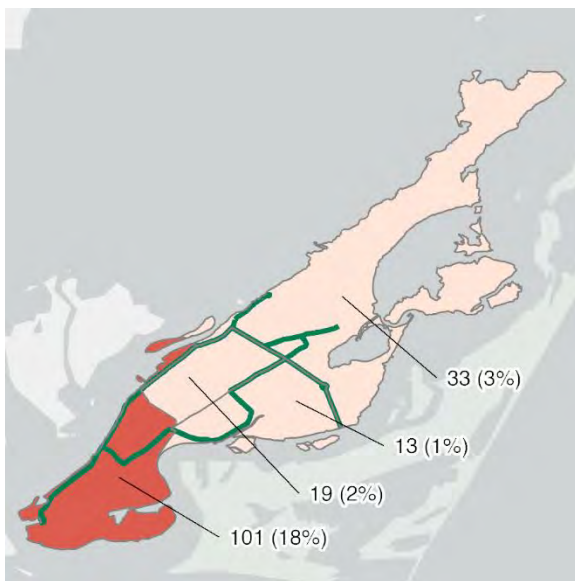
Source: ACS 2023 5-Year Estimates

Exhibit 21. Residents older than 65



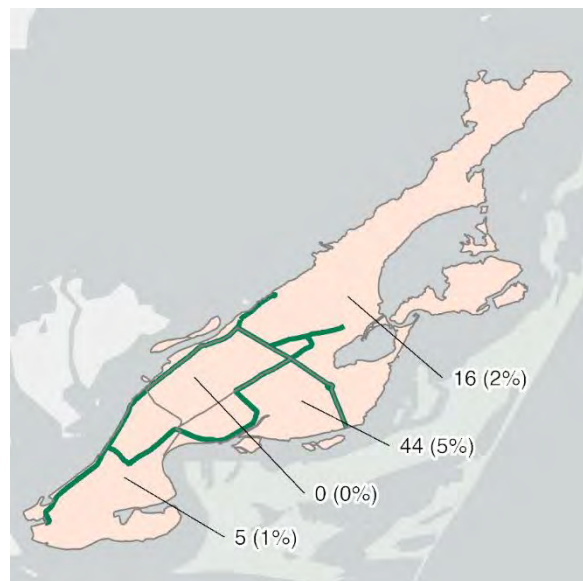
Source: ACS 2023 5-Year Estimates

Exhibit 22. Nonwhite Residents



Source: ACS 2023 5-Year Estimates

Exhibit 23. Hispanic/Latino Residents



Source: ACS 2023 5-Year Estimates

Seasonal Population

60% of homes in Chincoteague are vacant seasonally. Chincoteague’s summer population balloons to over 17,000 people, five times the size of the permanent population. This seasonal population growth increases transit demand in the summer. **Exhibit 24** shows the location of larger lodging options which are well distributed across the island. Lodging options range from Tom’s Cove campground, which can host up to 3,600 people to individual vacation rentals which are not indicated on the map.

Exhibit 24. Selection of Short-Term Lodging Options on Chincoteague



Source: Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce 2023 Capacity Survey

Transit to the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

The beach at the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) has previously been identified as the only major attraction not served by the Pony Express. In a 2010 study, the Volpe Center at the U.S. Department of Transportation determined that the NWR has some of the highest potential for transit among refuges nationwide, but this mode has been consistently decided against in planning facilities for the refuge.

Public transportation to the island was considered during creation of the refuge in 1967. A sand tram was operated in the early 1970s to spread out crowds along the beach although low usage led to this service being discontinued. As of 2010, the NWR operated shuttles from an inland parking lot to the beach, but this service appears to be discontinued. A shuttle to the beach was included as an alternative access scenario for the current beach relocation project, however it was discarded in favor of paving a new access road, multimodal path, and 961-space parking lot. Considering this, service to the beach is not included as an opportunity for improvement in this TDP. For more information, see the resources in Appendix B.

2.3.2 Opportunities for Improvement

This section describes opportunities for improvement based on the evaluation of performance and demand. These opportunities are feasible under existing funding levels.

Opportunity 1: Simplify routes to grow ridership and fare revenue

While the Pony Express operates two vehicles on similar loops, having two separate routes can be confusing for visitors and those unfamiliar with the service. Additionally, the variety of fare options and locations to purchase tokens adds further complexity to the service. Simplifying routes and fare policy would lower barriers to understanding the Pony Express, encourage new and old riders, and also make data collection and reporting easier.

Opportunity 2: Adjust scheduling to improve on-time performance

The Pony Express' on-time performance regularly devolves over the course of the evening, attributed to added congestion. Chincoteague should adapt the service schedule to address anticipated delays or work with local businesses to encourage patrons to use e-bikes and golf carts to reduce congestion.

Opportunity 3: Improve visibility to attract riders

Most Pony Express stops exist only as a sign. Adding stop amenities and employing digital features improve rider comfort and signals the importance of the Pony Express to the town. Making the system more visible and accessibility will encourage ridership by piquing people's interest toward the service.

Opportunity 4: Expand Pony Express service before 5pm

No part of Chincoteague is overserved by transit - the Pony Express effectively serves the most populated areas of Chincoteague. However, the entirety of the island is underserved before Pony Express service begins at 5pm. As many island businesses close around 10pm, adding trips before 5pm should attract more passengers to the service.

2.4 Opportunities to Collaborate with Others

Collaboration is an essential component of successful transit systems. Chincoteague is home to several businesses and organizations that could mutually benefit from collaboration with the Pony Express. The following opportunities for collaboration were identified through a site visit, history of prior collaboration, and existing service and performance gaps. These opportunities can be integrated with the opportunities for improvement to further develop community support.

Town of Chincoteague: While the town operates the Pony Express, it could implement additional initiatives that indirectly support the transit system. These can be lower-cost, such as revising the zoning ordinance to reduce parking requirements, or higher-cost like constructing streetscape improvements that support walking, biking, and transit.

STAR Transit: STAR Transit's Silver route connects Chincoteague to the mainland with five trips every weekday. This route has time points at the Chincoteague town office at 6:55am, 8:25am, 11:20am, 2:00pm, and 4:55pm. After leaving the town office, the bus loops through a section of town along Church Street and Main Street and stopping off-island at Wallops Island's main gate, Wattsville Corner Mart, and Oak Hall Food Lion. The Pony Express should maintain communication with STAR to ensure its residents transportation needs are met effectively.

Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce: A coalition of local businesses, the Chamber operates the town's visitor center as part of its primary goal to attract tourism to the island. The Chamber is a strong supporter of the Pony Express, covering fares on days with special events in addition to other initiatives. This relationship could be further developed with other opportunities for collaboration, including:

- Work with local businesses to improve nearby stops.
- Integrate the Pony Express map with other brochures produced by the Chamber of Commerce.
- Coordinate with tour boat operators. Many operators on the island offer sunset boat tours during the Pony Express' service window. Visitors could be encouraged to take the trolley to and from the harbor for their cruises. This could be promoted by waiving fares or additional communication or marketing materials with tour operators.
- Work with hotels and lodging to place brochures in lobbies.
- Consider selling tokens in bulk to local vendors for distribution to patrons.
- Conduct a fare study or market analysis to evaluate fare options for the Pony Express or understand demand for a history tour or other programs that would be beyond the Pony Express' scope. This project may be eligible for partial funding under DRPT's TRIP program.

Village Neighbors Chincoteague: While the Pony Express provides paratransit service as a complement to the Pony Express, most of these trip types appear to be served by informal networks like [Village Neighbors](#). Fiscally sponsored by Island Community House, Village Neighbors is a volunteer-run organization that supports aging in place for Chincoteague residents. In return for an annual membership fee, volunteers assist members with services including transportation. The organization estimates that it provided 143 trips for its members in 2024. The Pony Express should work with these organizations to understand the transportation needs of their population and how the services they offer fill existing gaps.

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Department of Rail and Public Transportation: DRPT administers several state sources of funding for transit improvements including the Transit Ridership Incentive Program which can partially fund passenger amenity or fare study projects. Eligible recipients are transportation providers that receive state operating assistance or local governments.

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge: While trolley service to the beach would mitigate traffic congestion, a beach shuttle was considered as an alternative access scenario for the current beach relocation project. The shuttle was discarded in favor of a new 961-space parking lot and multimodal path. Considering this, the Pony Express should maintain regular communication to participate in any discussion about transportation options within the refuge.

Federal Highway Administration: The FHWA administers several funding programs specific to improving access to federal lands that may be of interest to the Pony Express.

- [The Federal Lands Access Program](#) improves transportation facilities that provide access to, are adjacent to, or are located within Federal lands. The City of Petersburg received funding for 3 trolleybuses to improve access to Petersburg Battlefield in the FY13-14 project cycle. VDOT administers the FLAP program for Virginia.
- [The Federal Lands Transportation Program](#) provides funding for transportation facilities owned by federal agencies.

Chapter 3: Planned Improvements & Modifications

This chapter outlines planned modifications to the Pony Express over the next ten years. Planned modifications address opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2. The section begins by describing all eight planned service improvements, followed by a prioritization matrix with cost estimates, and concludes with a projection of service impacts.

3.1 Planned Service Improvements

The eight planned service improvement projects below provide steps toward achieving the goals, objectives, and strategies described in chapter 2. This list begins with no cost projects, progressing to those that require capital and operating investments. All proposed improvements can be undertaken within existing fiscal constraints unless otherwise noted.

Project 1: Combine the Red and Green Routes

Operating two routes, the Pony Express has a complex network for a system of its size. While they operate with only slight deviations, the red and green routes are presented as distinct to the public, with their own timetables and routes. Combining routes into a single loop would make the Pony Express easier for riders to understand, drivers to operate, and the town to manage.

Transitioning to a single route would lower barriers to visitors to understand how the service works and help them navigate the island's geography and major points of interest. Rather than knowing if a trolley is red or green, one could simply board knowing that it will go to their destination. Trolley drivers would all follow the same route, not counting any deviations that could still be served upon request. The proposed route, as shown in **Exhibit 26**, is a suggestion, with any route changes implemented only after engagement with riders.

As this would be a minor operational change, with no alterations in total service being provided, it is not expected to produce significant ridership gains alone. This project supports several goals, objectives, service standards, and opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2, including:

- Goal 2: Enable residents and visitors to engage in civic and social life
- Goal 3: Improve awareness of the Pony Express as a transit service
- Service Design Standard: Route Planning
- Opportunity 1: Simplify operations

Exhibit 25. Proposed Combined Pony Express Route



Project 2: Increase Headways to 20 Minutes

The Pony Express’ route is scheduled to take 30 minutes, but on-time performance data shows that driving the route takes longer. Remix and Google Maps estimate approximately 34 minutes to complete a circuit, not including any stops or pauses for people to board. This tight scheduling results in the devolution of the Pony Express’ on-time performance over the course of each evening, especially when there is traffic congestion.

Padding the timetable to assume a 40-minute loop to accommodate potential delays would improve the Pony Express’ on-time performance and make the service more predictable and reliable for riders. Increasing headways from 15 minutes to 20 minutes would increase wait times up to five minutes, however, riders on vacation may prioritize service reliability rather than speed, especially when the ride is scenic and comfortable.

A sample timetable showing an hour of service with a 20-minute headway is provided in **Exhibit 26**. As many stops are within a minute of one another, the Pony Express should consider actual run time and arrival times at each stop before formalizing timetable changes. Proposed timepoints, which are further described in the next project section, are highlighted in red.

This service change is not expected to have a significant impact on ridership as the service period is elongated with no change to the amount of service provided. This project would improve the rider experience by providing a more reliable service and driver experience by providing an achievable schedule.

This project supports several goals, objectives, service standards, and opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2, including:

- Goal 2: Enable residents and visitors to engage in civic and social life
- Goal 3: Improve awareness of the Pony Express as a transit service
- Service Design Standard: Service Reliability
- Opportunity 2: Adjust scheduling

Exhibit 26. Proposed Trolley Schedule with 20 Minute Headways, First Service Hour

Stop Name	Run 1	Run 2	Run 3	Run 4
Pine Grove	5:00	5:20	5:40	6:00
Municipal Complex	5:02	5:22	5:42	6:02
Ice Cream Parlors	5:05	5:25	5:45	6:05
Main/Church	5:07	5:27	5:47	6:07
Curtis Merritt Harbor	5:15	5:35	5:55	6:15
Seaweed Drive	5:17	5:37	5:57	6:17
Tom’s Cove	5:19	5:39	5:59	6:19
Veteran’s Memorial Park	5:20	5:40	6:00	6:20
Snug Harbor	5:22	5:42	6:02	6:22
Chicken City Road	5:24	5:44	6:04	6:24
Pony Centre	5:26	5:46	6:06	6:26
Chamber of Commerce	5:30	5:50	6:10	6:30
Museum of Chincoteague	5:33	5:53	6:13	6:33

Project 3: Implement Timepoints

Currently, riders must understand two separate timetables to know when the Pony Express will arrive at their stop. For example, trolleys are scheduled to arrive at the Main St/Church St stop at 8 minutes and 38 minutes past the hour on the green route and at 22 minutes and 51 minutes past the hour on the red route. If a rider had just missed a trolley, they would have to wait between 13 and 17 minutes depending on what part of the hour they are trying to ride. Implementing clockface scheduling with time points would create regular gaps between trolleys and make it easier for riders to estimate the arrival of the next trolley.

Assuming a circuit scheduled to take 40 minutes as recommended in project 2, time points could be established at major destinations at a memorable time past the hour. Regular increments like these are easier to remember, especially for visitors, and enhance the attractiveness of the service. Timepoint information could also be added to bus stop signage to improve usability.

The sample timetable in **Exhibit 27** shows timepoints at Pine Grove, Curtis Merritt Harbor, and the Chamber of Commerce. These locations were determined to be best for timepoints as they have areas for the bus to idle momentarily to maintain its schedule. The trolley pausing in busy areas for a moment would also make the vehicle more of a visible fixture in certain locations.

Again, this service change is not expected to have a significant impact on ridership as there is no change in the overall amount of service being provided. This project would instead improve rider experience by making service more reliable and easier to use.

This project supports several goals, objectives, service standards, and opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2, including:

- Goal 2: Enable residents and visitors to engage in civic and social life
- Goal 3: Improve awareness of the Pony Express as a transit service
- Service Design Standard: Service Reliability
- Service Design Standard: Customer Service
- Opportunity 2: Adjust scheduling
- Opportunity 3: Improve visibility

Exhibit 27. Proposed Timepoints, First Service Hour

Stop Name	Run 1	Run 2	Run 3	Run 4
Pine Grove	5:00	5:20	5:40	6:00
Curtis Merritt Harbor	5:15	5:35	5:55	6:15
Chamber of Commerce	5:30	5:50	6:10	6:30

Project 4: Clarify Fare Policy

Fares constitute the smallest portion of the Pony Express' operating budget but require the most work from riders. The Pony Express accepts two forms of fare media: tokens and quarters. While the brochure states that "ride tokens are available at local businesses," it does not name them specifically. Clarifying the fare policy would lower barriers to the service for visitors.

The Pony Express could partner with local businesses to supply tokens to riders, potentially including them in the brochure in return for a fee. Stretch actions that could also be considered under this project include adding new fare technologies or eliminating fares entirely. Cash use has steadily declined over the past decade, with consumers opting to make payments using cards and 'tap-to-pay' technologies.

Eliminating fares was popular during the Covid-19 pandemic to limit contact between riders and drivers but has remained in use by several other agencies in Virginia with non-traditional service types, a student population, or focus on equity. DRPT's TRIP program provides funding to transition operators to a fare-free system over a four-year period. However, this requires reallocating a portion of local revenues to fill the gap previously provided by fares.

This policy change is expected to benefit riders, but not to the extent that estimating future ridership based on this change is feasible. This project supports several goals, objectives, service standards, and opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2, including:

- Goal 2: Enable residents and visitors to engage in civic and social life
 - Objective D: Continuously identify service gaps and improvements
- Goal 3: Improve awareness of the Pony Express as a transit service
 - Objective E: Create positive involvement through community events
- Opportunity 1: Simplify operations

Project 5: Develop Community Partnerships through Marketing

Brochures are a crucial means by which Chincoteague businesses advertise their services to visitors and a common sight in hotels and attractions. The Pony Express brochure is a key marketing item to raise awareness of the service and serves as a great avenue for collaboration. Now that visitation is normalizing after the pandemic, it is an excellent time to revamp the brochure.

In concert with updates to reflect the new service schedule, the Pony Express could also highlight local businesses for a fee, ensure service details are integrated with other visitor-oriented maps, or investigate other Chincoteague publications that service details could be included in.

This project could have varied benefits to ridership dependent on implementation. Regardless, developing partnerships through the brochure would benefit riders by advertising relevant businesses along the route and building community support for the Pony Express service. This project supports several goals, objectives, service standards, and opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2, including:

- Goal 2: Enable residents and visitors to engage in civic and social life
 - Objective D: Continuously identify service gaps and improvements
- Goal 3: Improve awareness of the Pony Express as a transit service
 - Objective E: Create positive involvement through community events
 - Objective F: Provide the public with current information
- Service Design Standard: Customer Service
- Opportunity 3: Improve visibility

Project 6: Implement Real Time Vehicle Tracking Technology

Implementing real-time vehicle tracking technology builds the timepoints developed in project 2 by enabling riders to track vehicle locations directly on their smartphones. This project enhances the passenger experience by reducing the chance of riders missing their bus and allowing shorter wait times.

This project is expected to benefit ridership in return for slightly increased operating costs. Prior research on the impact of real-time bus information systems found modest increases in ridership attributed to the technology, but not in a large enough amount to make quantifying it feasible for the Pony Express.

This project supports several goals, objectives, service standards, and opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2, including:

- Goal 1: Provide safe and reliable public transportation services
- Goal 2: Enable residents and visitors to engage in civic and social life
- Goal 3: Improve awareness of the Pony Express as a transit service
- Service Design Standard: Service Reliability
- Service Design Standard: Compliance
- Opportunity 3: Improve accessibility

Project 7: Upgrade Bus Stop Amenities

Of the Pony Express' 18 signed stops, eight have benches and five have shelters. The custom-built shelters are a unique and attractive component of the service and make waiting for trolleys more comfortable. The experience of riding the Pony Express could be elevated by upgrading passenger amenities – be that by the town itself or local businesses. Upgrades can include new shelters, benches bike racks, or lower-cost changes like adding stop times to signs.

This project is expected to benefit ridership. Prior research that examined four transit agencies in Virginia found a statistically significant increase in ridership where bus stop infrastructure was improved. However, due to the scale of the Pony Express, quantifying ridership impacts is not feasible.

This project supports several goals, objectives, service standards, and opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2, including:

- Goal 1: Provide safe and reliable public transportation services
 - Objective B: Maintain fleet and equipment in a state of good repair
- Goal 2: Enable residents and visitors to engage in civic and social life
 - Objective D: Continuously identify service gaps and improvements
- Service Design Standard: Customer Service
- Opportunity 3: Improve visibility

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Project 8: Begin Service at 3pm

Chincoteague intends to provide the same level of service for the Pony Express as it currently exists. While the it serves the entire island of Chincoteague, the island is underserved until at 5pm. If additional operating funds become available, this project describes extending service earlier in the day to begin at 3pm. This project would address transit demand during underserved periods, add revenue hours while not requiring any additional vehicles, and facilitate transfers between STAR Transit.

Assuming a linear projection of service based on vehicle revenue hours, this project is estimated to add 6,100 riders annually. This project could be piloted on select days to gauge transit demand in the 3pm to 5pm period more accurately.

This project supports several goals, objectives, service standards, and opportunities for improvement identified in chapter 2, including:

- Goal 2: Enable residents and visitors to engage in civic and social life
- Service Design Standard: Route Planning
- Service Design Standard: Service Reliability
- Opportunity 4: Expand service

Exhibit 28. Pony Express Service Extension Ridership Projection

VRH			VRM			Ridership		
Baseline	Extended	Increment	Baseline	Extended	Increment	Baseline	Extended	Increment
890	1,246	+356	19,580	27,412	+7,832	15,249	21,349	+ 6,100

Source: Calculated using 2014 - 2020 VRH, VRM, and UPT averages. Assumes a linear relationship between VRH and ridership.

3.2 Prioritization of Planned Service Improvements

This section sorts projects into three timeframes for implementation across the ten-year planning horizon. These projects, their implementation timeline, potential funding sources, and estimated costs are summarized in **Exhibit 29**. Estimated costs were developed using operating costs reported to DRPT, Chincoteague’s FY25 budget, or actual quotes from vendors. Most projects can be considered as having no cost aside from the administrative time required for implementation. All projects can be reasonably expected to be completed within seven years.

None of these proposed service improvements are currently contained in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) or Six-Year Improvement Program (SYIP). These projects will be submitted for inclusion in the appropriate document, as required, depending on the source of funding. Funding allocated for the Pony Express in the current FY26 SYIP is shown below in **Exhibit 30**.

Exhibit 29: Summary of Planned Improvements

Fiscal Year	Project Name	Added Capital Cost	Added Operating Cost	State Funding Source	Local Match	Local Cost
Short-Term Improvements (1 to 3 years)						
2027	1: Combine Routes			N/A		
2027	2: Increase Headways					
2027	3: Clockface Scheduling					
2027	4: Clarify Fares					
2027	5: Marketing Materials					
2027	6: Real Time Tracking	N/A	\$3,000	MERIT Capital MIN	4%	\$120
Mid-Term Improvements (3 to 7 years)						
2029	7: Upgrade Stops	\$100 - \$20,000	N/A	MERIT Capital SGR TRIP Amenities	4%	\$4 - \$800
2031	8: Extend Service	N/A	\$52,318	MERIT Operating	20%-30%	~\$13,000

Source: Project 7 cost estimate from *BusWhere* quote equipment rental. Project 7 cost estimate based on costs from similar DRPT-managed projects and assumes an additional bus shelter every other year. Project 8 cost was estimated by calculating the incremental operating cost: (FY26 operating expenses ÷ 890 VRH × 2 hours × 2 vehicles × 89 days). Local match percentages are based on prior allocations. All cost estimates assume a 3% annual inflation rate.

Exhibit 30: FY26 Pony Express Funding

Source	Operating Expense	Capital Expense (Replacement Trolley)
Federal	\$45,683.50	\$84,000
State	\$21,388.20	\$204,000
Local	\$45,683.50	\$12,000

Source: DRPT FY26 Six-Year Improvement Program

3.3 Service Development

The following service projection assumes the Pony Express will continue its current service levels with 2 vehicles operating from 5pm to 10pm for 89 days until the service extension described in the previous section is implemented in FY2031. Otherwise, revenue hours, revenue miles, and annual ridership are expected to remain stable.

Service development may be impacted by several external factors. Specific to Chincoteague's coastal location is a heightened risk of recurrent flooding and shoreline erosion attributed to climate change. At the time of writing, Chincoteague's beach is currently closed due to damage from Hurricane Erin, impacting visitation to the town's main attraction aside from the Pony Swim. Other factors that may increase costs or affect transit service delivery include impoundment of Congressionally-appropriated funds, volatility in the cost of goods and consumer spending due to tariffs, the nationwide shortage of qualified transit drivers and mechanics, and residual supply chain delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. See Appendix B for resources that further describe external service delivery factors.

Exhibit 31. Pony Express 10-Year Service Projection

Year	Annual Revenue Hours	Annual Revenue Miles	Annual Ridership
2025	890	19,580	15,014
2026	890	19,580	15,014
2027	890	19,580	15,014
2028	890	19,580	15,014
2029	890	19,580	15,014
2030	890	19,580	15,014
2031	1,246	27,412	21,349
2032	1,246	27,412	21,349
2033	1,246	27,412	21,349
2034	1,246	27,412	21,349
2035	1,246	27,412	21,349

Source: Incremental VRH calculated as (89 days × 5 hours × 2 vehicles). Incremental VRM calculated as (89 days × 11 mile route × 10 circuits × 2 vehicles). Incremental ridership calculated using the average annual ridership from 2014 to 2019.

Chapter 4: Implementation Plan

4.1 Asset Management

Transit agencies receiving funding from the Federal Transit Administration must create and maintain a Transit Asset Management (TAM) plan for their vehicles, facilities, and equipment. As a small transit provider, the town of Chincoteague participated in DRPT's Tier II TAM plan. This plan is used to identify capital needs associated with maintaining a state of good repair for all assets. DRPT has formulated specific policies governing service, fleet, and facilities that are described in the plan. The Pony Express adheres to the replacement, rehabilitation, retrofit, and fleet size policies included in this plan, fulfilling the standards and benchmarks established for fiscal years 2022 to 2025.

Performance targets for the Pony Express' revenue vehicles are shown in **Exhibit 32**. It should be noted that these useful life benchmarks (ULB) differ from those in TransAM as the Tier II TAM plan does not differentiate between trolleys and regular buses. Assumed ULBs are 10 years for trolleys and 4 years for minivans. The Pony Express is not currently pursuing plans to electrify its fleet or transition its vehicles to zero emission technologies.

The Pony Express uses qualitative visual measures, passenger complaints, and funding availability to address issues with passenger amenities as they arise. Aside from the municipal lot where trolleys are stored when not in use, the Pony Express has no dedicated maintenance or operations facilities. Similarly, technology systems are updated as necessary.

4.2 Capital Implementation Plan

The town of Chincoteague is responsible for maintaining its assets in a state of good repair. This section shows the current vehicle replacement schedule from the Pony Express' five-year capital plan and a proposed capital spending plan for the projects described in chapter 3. The plan uses the more conservative useful life benchmarks (ULBs) from TransAM and existing federal match requirements to estimate local costs.

There are not currently any planned facility improvements; however, the Pony Express is planning to procure a replacement paratransit van in 2027 and replacement trolley in 2028 as described in their current 5-Year Capital Budget.

The implementation plan for enhancing passenger amenities as part of project 8 was developed using DRPT engineering cost estimates from similar projects statewide. These estimates assume that projects will include federal funding; however, it should be noted that the cost of these projects would be significantly less with exclusively local sources. The plan assumes regular amenity replacements at a staggered schedule. The Pony Express could also discuss with local businesses with a stop outside about considering providing benches for their shoppers and the Pony Express' riders. A new set of bus stop signs with QR codes is projected for FY29 alongside implementation of real-time vehicle tracking.

Pony Express FY26-36 Transit Development Plan

Exhibit 32. Pony Express Vehicles and Vehicle Performance Targets

Asset Class	ULB (Years)	Target %	# of Vehicles	# Beyond ULB
Bus	14	15%	4	1
Minivan	8	20%	1	1

Source: DRPT TAM Plan, Pony Express Vehicle inventory

Exhibit 33. Pony Express Replacement Vehicle Cost Schedule

Vehicle	FY26	FY27	FY28	FY29	FY30	FY31	FY32	FY33	FY34	FY35	FY36
Trolley	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
Minivan	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total Cost	\$300k	\$309k	\$53k	\$0	\$0	\$348k	\$60k	\$369k	\$0	\$0	\$403k
Local Cost	\$12k	\$12k	\$2.1k	\$0	\$0	\$14k	\$2.4k	\$15k	\$0	\$0	\$16k

Source: Pony Express FY26 5-Year Capital Budget. Replacement estimates beyond FY29 are based on assumed ULBs and existing asset ages from TransAM. Costs assume 3% annual inflation and a 4% local match requirement.

Exhibit 34. Pony Express Passenger Amenities Upgrades Cost Schedule

Item	FY26-28	FY29	FY30	FY31	FY32	FY33	FY34	FY35	FY36
Bus Stop Sign		\$400		\$450		\$460		\$490	
Bench			\$3,400			\$3,700			\$4,000
Custom Shelter		\$21,000			\$24,000			\$26,000	
Total		\$21,400	\$3,400	\$450	\$24,000	\$4,160	\$0	\$26,490	\$4,000

Source: DRPT Engineering cost estimates. Assumes 3 sign replacements every other year after FY29 and 3% annual inflation.

Chapter 5: Financial Plan

This chapter projects the Pony Express' annual operating, maintenance, and capital costs over the next ten years (FY26-36). It includes baseline costs assuming no additional projects from this TDP are implemented and an enhanced service scenario that includes all TDP projects. Finally, this chapter identifies financial resources that may be available for implementation. All forecasts assume an annual inflation factor of 3%.

5.1 Operating Expenses

Projected costs are based on existing operating costs per revenue hour and assume an annual inflation rate of 3%. The share of funding sources is assumed to remain consistent with existing splits (20% local, 30% state, 50% federal) to cover any annual operating deficits. The Pony Express should pursue local approval for these proposed projects and consider different implementation structures as described in the opportunities for collaboration section in chapter 2.

Projected operating expenses and revenues are shown in **Exhibit 35**. Implementing real-time vehicle technology is estimated to add \$3,000 a year to operating costs beginning in FY27. Extending service to 3pm is estimated to add \$44,686 a year to operating costs beginning in FY31. This service expansion is not expected to incur additional capital costs and can be implemented under existing staffing and fleet sizes.

Assuming funding splits remain stable, required local contributions (not including fares) will increase from \$24,910 in FY26 to \$51,568 in FY36. The Pony Express should consider additional sources of revenue including fare changes around FY30 to offset the additional funds needed for the proposed service expansion.

5.2 Capital Expenses

Projected costs are based on existing capital costs, estimates in the Pony Express' five-year capital budget, and assume an inflation factor of 3%. See the capital implementation plan in Chapter 4 for more details on the Pony Express' fleet, state of good repair guidelines, and a list of proposed passenger amenities for replacement or improvement by fiscal year. The Pony Express' only facility is the parking lot at the Chincoteague municipal complex, and there are no plans to acquire additional or expand existing facilities.

Projected capital costs and revenues are shown in **Exhibit 36**. Baseline vehicle replacements included in the five-year capital plan were extrapolated using useful life benchmarks for replacements beyond FY30. Replacements are expected to cost \$300,000 for a trolley and \$50,000 for an accessible minivan in FY26 dollars. Stop amenities are proposed to be replaced or improved starting in FY29, with costs varying by year dependent on the items being replaced.

The projected capital budget assumes that existing funding splits remain stable. Vehicle replacements are assumed to be funded through DRPT MERIT State of Good Repair funds, while passenger amenity upgrades assume DRPT TRIP funds. Each of these sources cover up to 68% of eligible project costs, with the remainder able to be covered by federal or local sources. The table assumes federal funding for vehicles, leaving a 4% contribution from the town of Chincoteague.

Pony Express FY26-36 Transit Development Plan

Exhibit 35. Pony Express Projected Operating Expenses and Revenues

	FY26	FY27	FY28	FY29	FY30	FY31	FY32	FY33	FY34	FY35	FY36
Operating Expenses											
Baseline	\$96,367	\$99,258	\$102,236	\$105,303	\$108,462	\$111,716	\$115,067	\$118,519	\$122,075	\$125,737	\$129,509
Project 6: Real-time tracking	\$0	\$3,000	\$3,090	\$3,183	\$3,278	\$3,377	\$3,478	\$3,582	\$3,690	\$3,800	\$3,914
Project 8: 3pm service start	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$52,318	\$53,888	\$55,505	\$57,170	\$58,885	\$60,651
Total Costs	\$96,367	\$102,258	\$105,326	\$108,486	\$111,740	\$159,779	\$164,572	\$169,509	\$174,595	\$179,832	\$185,227
Operating Revenues											
Federal FTA 5311 (50%)	\$48,184	\$51,129	\$52,663	\$54,243	\$55,870	\$79,890	\$82,286	\$84,755	\$87,298	\$89,916	\$92,614
State (20%)	\$19,273	\$20,452	\$21,065	\$21,697	\$22,348	\$31,956	\$32,914	\$33,902	\$34,919	\$35,966	\$37,045
Local (30%)	\$24,910	\$26,677	\$27,598	\$28,546	\$29,522	\$43,934	\$45,372	\$46,853	\$48,379	\$49,950	\$51,568
Fares	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000
Total Revenues	\$96,367	\$102,258	\$105,326	\$108,486	\$111,740	\$159,779	\$164,572	\$169,509	\$174,595	\$179,832	\$185,227

Source: DRPT FY26 SYIP and Pony Express budget. Fares based on FY24 actual.

Exhibit 36. Pony Express Projected Capital Expenses and Revenues

	FY26	FY27	FY28	FY29	FY30	FY31	FY32	FY33	FY34	FY35	FY36
Capital Expenses											
Vehicle Replacements	\$300,000	\$309,000	\$53,000	\$0	\$0	\$348,00	\$60,000	\$369,000	\$0	\$0	\$403,000
Project 7: Stop Amenities	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$21,400	\$3,400	\$3,927	\$24,000	\$7,849	\$0	\$26,490	\$8,031
Total Costs	\$300,000	\$309,000	\$53,000	\$21,400	\$3,400	\$351,927	\$84,000	\$376,849	\$0	\$26,490	\$411,031
Capital Revenues											
State MERIT SGR (68%)*	\$204,000	\$210,120	\$36,040	\$0	\$0	\$236,640	\$40,800	\$250,920	\$0	\$0	\$274,040
Federal FTA 5311 (28%)*	\$84,000	\$86,520	\$14,840	\$0	\$0	\$97,440	\$16,800	\$103,320	\$0	\$0	\$112,840
Local (4%)*	\$12,000	\$12,360	\$2,120	\$0	\$0	\$13,920	\$2,400	\$14,760	\$0	\$0	\$16,120
State TRIP PA (68%)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$14,552	\$2,312	\$2,670	\$16,320	\$5,337	\$0	\$18,013	\$5,461
Other Source (32%)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$6,848	\$1,088	\$1,257	\$7,680	\$2,512	\$0	\$8,477	\$2,570
Total Revenues	\$300,000	\$309,000	\$53,000	\$21,400	\$3,400	\$351,927	\$84,000	\$376,849	\$0	\$26,490	\$411,031

Source: DRPT FY26 SYIP and Pony Express Five-Year Capital Plan. *MERIT SGR assumed for vehicle replacements only.

Appendix A: Agency Profile & System Overview

A.1 History

The Pony Express was initially recommended in the 2002 *Chincoteague 2020 Transportation Plan*. The service began operating in 2004 with a leased vehicle funded by a FY03 Demonstration grant from the Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) and a local match from the Town. The Town acquired a used trolley from Greenbackville in 2005 and leased a shuttle to comply with ADA requirements. In 2006 the service began receiving FTA 5311 Rural funds and purchased two new trolleys with wheelchair lifts. The Pony Express has operated in a substantially similar manner since then in terms of routing, level of service, fleet size, and schedule. Total operating expenses and revenues is around one hundred thousand dollars. See **Exhibit A** for a three-year retrospective of capital and operating expenses and revenues.

Exhibit A. Pony Express Budget, FY23-FY25

	FY23	FY24	FY25
Operating Expenses	\$98,842	\$100,961	\$92,803
Operating Revenues	\$98,842	\$100,961	\$92,803
Federal	\$47,421	\$48,481	\$43,902
State	\$23,547	\$17,722	\$11,947
Local	\$23,874	\$30,758	\$32,954
Fares	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$4,000
Capital Expenses	\$0	\$0	\$0
Capital Revenues	\$0	\$0	\$0
Federal	\$0	\$0	\$0
State	\$0	\$0	\$0
Local	\$0	\$0	\$0

Source: National Transit Database, 2023-2025 SYIP.

A.2 Governance

The Pony Express is directly operated by the Town of Chincoteague. The Town is governed by the town council which includes six councilmembers and the mayor, as shown in **Exhibit B**. All positions are elected at-large for staggered four-year terms with 3 open seats every other year. The council selects a Vice Mayor from the council after each election to perform the duties of mayor in their absence. The Town does not have any dedicated committees for transportation.

Exhibit B: Chincoteague Town Council Composition

Name	Position	Term
Denise P. Bowden	Mayor	January 1, 2025 - December 31, 2028
J. Nick Howard	Vice Mayor	January 1, 2025 – December 31, 2028
Ellen W. Richardson	Councilmember	December 1, 2022 – December 31, 2026
William T. McComb, Jr.	Councilmember	January 1, 2025 – December 31, 2028
Jay Savage	Councilmember	December 1, 2022 – December 31, 2026
Christopher D. Bott	Councilmember	December 1, 2022 – December 31, 2026
Gene W. Taylor	Councilmember	January 1, 2025 – December 31, 2028

Source: <https://chincoteague-va.gov/town-council-and-mayor/>

A.3 Organizational Structure

The Pony Express operates with a staff of seven overseen by the Town Manager. The town's Director of Transportation, Billy King, manages six part-time trolley drivers. Three drivers operate the service at any one time, with two drivers operating a trolley and the third serving as dispatch. The Pony Express does not currently operate any contracted transportation services and employees are not currently represented by a labor union.

A.4 Services Provided and Areas Served

Chincoteague operates fixed route and paratransit service on the island. In the summer months from approximately 5 to 10pm. In 2025, the PE is operating every day in July and August, every weekend in May and June, and select weekends in September and October. Stops can be accessed by sidewalks in more commercial areas, but residential areas lack sidewalks and bike facilities; stops are in the grass by the road. The trolley does not accommodate bicycles. The service is focused on connecting major attractions – the harbor, the museum, and commercial areas on Main St and Maddox Blvd. There is a bike lane on Maddox Boulevard to the NWR. Paratransit meets ADA requirements by serving all areas within ¼ mile of a fixed route stop. Due to the small size of the island and service, there are no shelter placement or bus stop guidelines, simply to provide the maximum amenities practicable. The Town does not offer any travel transit programs. The island is also served by STAR Transit's Silver Route which provides five trips to the island on weekdays, with a single trip overlapping with the Pony Express' service. Trolleys are stored at the Chincoteague Municipal Complex where they begin and end each loop.

A.5 Fare Structures, Payments, and Purchasing

Fares are \$0.50 for the Pony Express Trolley and \$1.00 for the ADA paratransit service. Exact change and tokens are accepted on the trolley. The Town has tokens minted each year for this purpose. Tokens are available at the Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center and are distributed to various local businesses.

On several days with special events, the Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce funds fares for the entire day, making rides free for all passengers. Additionally, some businesses along the Pony Express route alignment purchase tokens from the Town to distribute to customers to encourage patronage.

A.6 Transit Asset Management – Existing Fleets & Facilities

Transit agencies receiving funding from the Federal Transit Administration must create and maintain a Transit Asset Management (TAM) plan for their vehicles, facilities, and equipment. As a small transit provider, the town of Chincoteague participated in DRPT’s Tier II TAM plan, available [here](#). This plan is used to identify capital needs associated with maintaining a state of good repair for all assets. DRPT has formulated specific policies governing service, fleet, and facilities that are described in the plan. The Pony Express adheres to the replacement, rehabilitation, retrofit, and fleet size policies included in this plan, fulfilling the standards and benchmarks established for fiscal years 2022 to 2025.

As seen in **Exhibit C**, the Pony Express maintains 4 vehicles – 3 trolleys and a paratransit van. Three assets are at or beyond their useful life benchmark, but all are under their useful service miles. Vehicles are stored and fueled at the town’s municipal complex.

Exhibit C. Pony Express Vehicle Assets, 2025

TransAM Asset ID	VIN	Vehicle Name	Useful Life Benchmark	Year	% ULB	Useful Service Miles	Odometer	% USM
248200L	1F66F5DN4M0A15041	Thunder	10	2023	20%	350,000	7,603	2%
179717L	2C7WDGGBG4HR5628	Surfer Dude	4	2017	200%	100,000	13,002	13%
150630L	1F66F5DY4F0A10242	Stormy	10	2015	100%	350,000	47,229	13%
10978	1F66F5DY8B0A11744	Misty	10	2011	140%	350,000	66,887	19%

Source: TransAM

A.7 Transit Security Program

All Pony Express drivers complete annual safety training and drug and alcohol testing as required. Safety training takes place in April, prior to the start of the season. Pony Express staff are supported by cameras on each trolley to ensure trolleys remain safe and secure.

A.8 Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) Programs

All Pony Express vehicles are equipped with onboard cameras. The Pony Express is currently setting up a GTFS-Flex feed to enable digital trip planning. The Pony Express is included on the ConnectingVA website, has access to Remix for planning needs, and utilizes TransAM for asset management.

A.9 Data Collection & Ridership/Revenue Reporting Method

The Pony Express transit system relies on manual processes to collect and report ridership and revenue service data. For ridership data collection, drivers use a manual clicker to count each rider and record the total on a daily report sheet, completed for each shift. The system uses cash fare boxes that accept \$0.50 in exact change or a ridership token.

Revenue service data is collected through manual driver logs. Drivers record the start and end odometer readings on their daily report sheets to calculate total miles. All hours and miles are considered revenue service time, as vehicles are always in operation. During a driver's break, a dispatcher takes over the route for one full loop to ensure continuous service. While on break, the driver handles phone calls before returning to their regular duties.

The system does not utilize modern technologies such as electronic fareboxes, automatic passenger counters (APCs), or automatic vehicle locators (AVLs). All financial data is managed by the Town of Chincoteague's accounting department. Fares are hand-counted daily by town staff, and the totals are reported in an Excel spreadsheet. All performance and financial data are ultimately stored in Excel files.

The audited financials submitted to DRPT are a section of the Town's general ledger. The Pony Express is classified as a rural reporter within the National Transit Database (NTD) process and submits its data annually in collaboration with DRPT. The Pony Express maintains a record of on-time monthly performance data submissions to DRPT. The Transit Director informally reviews data from previous years to check for irregularities when submitting monthly reports, though there is no formal data review process in place.

A.10 Coordination with Other Transportation Providers

The Pony Express does not currently coordinate with other transit service providers, transportation network companies, taxi companies, human service providers, bikeshare systems, or car share companies.

Appendix B: Resources & References

Chapter 1: System Overview

- [Chincoteague Ponies \(2025\) - Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [About Our Island \(2025\) - Town of Chincoteague](#)

Chapter 2: System Evaluation

Transit to the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge

- [USFWS Chincoteague NWR beach parking relocation project description - \(2024\)](#)
- [From plan to action: Implementing the first national Long Range Transportation Plan of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service \(2017\) - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#)
- [Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge alternative transportation study \(2010\) – Volpe Center](#)
- [Transit and trail connections: Assessment of visitor access to National Wildlife Refuges \(2010\)](#)
- [Assateague Island administrative history \(2003\) – National Park Service](#)

Chapter 3: Planned Improvements & Modifications

Service Development Projects

- Raida, A., Ohlms, P.B., & Chen, T.D. (2023). *Improving ridership projections of proposed bus and rail transit projects to evaluate congestion reduction effects*. Virginia Transportation Research Council. http://www.virginiadot.org/vtrc/main/online_reports/pdf/23-r16.pdf
- Brakewood, C., Macfarlane, G.S., & Watkins, K. (2015). The impact of real-time information on bus ridership in New York City. *Transportation Research Part C: Emerging Technologies*, 53, 59-75. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trc.2015.01.021>
- Tang, L., & Thakuriah, P. (2012). Ridership effects of real-time bus information system: A case study in the City of Chicago. *Transportation Research Part C: Emerging Technologies*, 22, 146-161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trc.2012.01.001>
- [Diary of Consumer Payment Choice. \(2024\). Federal Reserve Financial Services](#)

Service Development Challenges

- [Transit Workforce Shortage \(2023\) - American Public Transportation Association](#)
- [Coastal Inundation and Shoreline Erosion \(2024\) – Virginia Department of Energy](#)
- [Chincoteague beach still closed due to damage from Hurricane Erin \(2025\) – Chesapeake Mag](#)
- [The Economic Implications of Tariff Increases \(2025\) – Federal Reserve](#)
- [Trump rescission proposal builds on illegal impoundments, would undermine future funding deals \(2025\) – Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)