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## **Do You Commute to Norwalk? Check Out Transit District's Ride-Share Program**

**Author :** David Gurliacci

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You can't beat the convenience of on-demand ride services like Uber and Lyft, but wouldn't it be great if a similar ride-sharing service was available locally and for free?

We're not talking about existing [ParaTransit](#) services for the disabled or even some Connecticut communities' senior transport services. No, the newest "microtransit" services are much more for the masses.

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Such a service has met tremendous success in Norwalk, and will soon launch in Westport and several other eastern Connecticut towns.

**In Norwalk**

The Norwalk program is called Wheels2U and is run by the Norwalk Transit District using the agency's paratransit minibus fleet. You [download the app](#) of the same name and when you're ready to roll, you summon a ride-share.

The service began in the fall of 2018 with about 300 trips per month. They're now up to 2,200 rides per month. Available Thursday through Sunday evenings, you can ride anywhere in a 3-square-mile area (about 25 percent of the city), from the train stations to Merritt 7, from the old downtown to the new (Washington Street).

So far, the service is free, though they may convert in April to a flat rate of \$2 per passenger per ride with a discount for groups. Because it's a ride-sharing service, you may have to wait anywhere from 10 to 12 minutes for your pickup and a make a few stops before yours, but it's a lot cheaper than driving or taking a cab.

**Elsewhere**

The service has been so popular that they're testing an expansion in Westport this summer, replacing existing commuter shuttles with an on-demand service to the train stations. Subsidized by the town, rides would cost \$1.75.

The Stonington microtransit service is branded as SEAT HOP and requires the free [TransLoc app](#). Replacing the current Route 10 bus, SEAT HOP will run from 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday in the Mystic to Pawcatuck area of the coastal community.

For the first month, rides will be free. After that, the fares will be the same as the SEAT bus: \$2 per ride, \$1 for seniors and the disabled. The bus route it replaces had less than 600 riders a month.

In Old Saybrook and Essex, the Estuary Transit District ran a successful test of [their Xtramile service](#) last summer, averaging 30 to 40 riders per day, running six days a week.

Ride services are especially popular with young people who don't want the hassle and cost of car ownership.

While many riders use these services to run errands, others use it for what transit planners call "the last mile," getting them to and from the train station.

**Replace Less Used Train Branches?**

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Critics of the low ridership of Metro-North's branch lines go so far as to suggest that the trains be parked and similar ride-sharing apps take their place for commuters.

Because of the high fixed costs of running a railroad, the per-rider subsidy on non-mainline trains is pretty high — on the Danbury branch, \$17; [Waterbury](#), \$24; Shore Line East, \$50; and on the new Hartford Line, \$56. Cynics suggest it would be cheaper to give each rail rider a microtransit voucher, assuming, of course, there's room on the roadways for those added vehicles.

It's also easy to cut those train subsidies: Just increase ridership! Add more trains, make them faster and more reliable, and ridership should increase.