

# ▶ Operator chooses low-floor buses to enhance productivity

Bellingham, Wash.-based **Whatcom Transportation Authority's** paratransit system has noticed measurable benefits during its recent low-floor bus rollout. The buses went into service in early April.

The vehicles, manufactured by **Arboc Mobility**, are the program's first to be equipped with ramps instead of lifts.

Before purchasing the vehicles, the operator conducted several site visits last year across the U.S., focusing primarily on transit agencies in the state of Washington that use low-floor buses.

The carrier's main concern, when considering the buses, was dwell time at pickup and drop locations. "We made some back-of-the-envelope projections of what it might mean if we had a fleet of fully equipped low-floor buses, and how much time that might save us," **Cris Colburn**, manager of specialized transportation, says. "Now that we have them, we're seeing a difference in dwell times between the rest of our buses and the low-floor buses, something like a minute of dwell time whether the rider is a wheelchair user or a walking rider."

One minute of dwell time on either end of a ride means roughly two minutes per ride, Colburn points out. "Our productivity for paratransit is somewhere on the high side, at three trips an hour, so we're thinking we might see somewhere between 45 and 60 minutes of time savings." For Whatcom, that would translate into approximately two or three more rides per eight-hour shift.

Another benefit the operator anticipated in acquiring the low-floor buses was removing the obstacle of steps for riders. "We believe that the elimination of the stairwell...represents a safety improvement," Colburn says.

In addition, since the new low-floor vehicles have been in service, Whatcom has seen fuel savings of about one mile per gal-



**Whatcom Transportation Authority is saving one minute of dwell time on each end of the trips it delivers with its two new Arboc Mobility low-floor buses.**

lon better fuel economy. "Especially in these times, a few hundred bucks a vehicle a year [helps]," Colburn says.

Whatcom is still monitoring locations with steeper grades that may be difficult to serve with a ramp, how the boarding works inside the bus and securement. "We're seeing how they work as far as access in different locations," Colburn explains. "You never know what combination of wheelchairs might be assigned to a given driver. You have to think, 'Will these three people who use wheelchairs be able to fit on this run?'"

The operator's board of directors has approved the purchase of two more vehicles, which are expected to arrive in the fourth quarter.

## **FAST FACTS**

**Agency:** Whatcom Transportation Authority

**Location:** Bellingham, Wash.

**ADA riders transported in 2010:** 174,616

**Total vehicles:** 40