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# Downtown's ready for son of FRED

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By  
Bill



**Cheryl Mathis is an ambassador with the Downtown Norfolk Council and a FRED driver who operates the free service.**

Cresenzo

[bill.cresenzo@insidebiz.com](mailto:bill.cresenzo@insidebiz.com)

In downtown Norfolk, FRED is in hot demand.

When he cruises down the street, people stop and stare. They call out his name with a cheery "

"Everybody loves FRED," said Mary Miller, marketing director of the Downtown Norfolk Council. "He's our most beloved employee."

FRED, or Free Ride Every Day, is a solar- and electric-powered Low Speed Vehicle that the council can call the special FRED hotline, and a dispatcher will send FRED to pick them up and take them to downtown's improvement district, which spans 48 blocks.

When you're ready to leave, just call FRED again, and he'll be there.

Reaction to FRED has been so positive that the Downtown Norfolk Council plans to raise the number of carts to 300, which will cost around \$15,000, said Rod McLeod, the council's director of operations. The council's budget is \$1.5 million. The council gets a portion of its revenue from dues, but the majority of its budget comes from property owners pay.

The cost of the drivers is paid by the council, a private organization of 300 business and individual business, cultural, retail and residential initiatives in downtown Norfolk. Miller said the council is planning for a second FRED.

The drivers of FRED are part of the council's ambassador program, which provides foot escorts

FRED can carry up to five people - babies and children in booster seats are not allowed for safe mph with no one in it. The typical speed is around 15 mph.

McLeod bought FRED from a Florida-based company called Cruise Car. The carts can be used doesn't exceed 35 mph.

The council got the idea of naming it FRED from the public transportation system in Halifax, No

From October to April, FRED carried 3,800 passengers, Miller said. The number would have be commission for three weeks during that time.

Many of the calls originate from downtown hotels.

"When we launched the program, we were very aggressive about marketing to hotels," Miller sa

Since FRED runs on solar and electric power, it can travel longer on a sunny day. When the sol it's time to put FRED down for a nap" so he can charge up on his electrical power.

The trips on FRED are smooth, the drivers are friendly and they don't accept tips. During rain, F

"Little old FRED," Pattie Anderson, executive sales meeting manager for Marriott, said with affe guests."

Anderson said that guests frequently use it to go to restaurants, and convention-goers use it to Sheraton.

Since the service is free and customers must call to book a ride, FRED doesn't run on a set sch spotty.

Anderson said that she has had to occasionally deal with frustrated guests, who expect an imm

"I think it's a great addition to downtown," she said. "We definitely could use more of them." nib