

Who's Driving app aims to help parents in need of a carpool

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Busy parents who know the difficulties of arranging carpools for their kids now have a new application, Who's Driving, to help.

Entrepreneurs Paul and Anne Cramer created the app because as busy parents, they realized there had to be a better way than group text messages to manage rides for kids.

In late August, their Minneapolis-based startup, Who's Driving Inc., launched its namesake app for iOS and Android platforms in time for the back to school carpooling season. Initial response to the app's release was strong but the company soon had to pump the brakes on additional development as it hit a funding snag.

The Cramers had contributed about \$400,000, and Paul Cramer was also conducting a SAFE investment that has now raised \$275,000 of a \$500,000 goal. A SAFE investment (simple agreement for future equity) is a form of financing that can attract many smaller investors and are popular among Silicon Valley startups. It's an alternative to convertible notes and debt financing and generally leads to traditional Series A venture financing round.

A friend of the Cramers with three busy kids brought them the idea a couple of years ago and the idea percolated until the couple had the time and resources to pursue the idea further. One of those key resources was the availability of another friend, programmer Mark Wilkie.

Last year, Wilkie left his job as chief technology officer of New York-based BuzzFeed and moved with his wife and daughter back to Minneapolis. Until recently, he was on the Cramers' payroll as he built out the app with a team of remote developers in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Paul Cramer is a tech startup veteran. Anne Cramer, a creative and marketing expert and former small business owner, quit her job earlier this year to work on customer service, marketing and branding.

The social network application for carpool drivers promises to make communication easier and build trusted carpool networks. The key to success is users who invite trusted drivers into their networks. If the app delivers on its promise of ease of use and time savings, then the active users should effectively become brand ambassadors who convince others to get the app and join their networks.

"The nice thing I like about Who's Driving is that baked into it is this idea of community," Wilkie said in August. "There is this inherently social nature to it because you have to do it with other people."

As the app started gaining traction in the marketplace, funding commitments to the SAFE investment began to slow - the three partners were running out of money and needed to scale back.

Reed Robinson, a co-founder of Beta.Mn, which supports Minnesota's startup community, said it is not uncommon for fundraising to take longer than expected for startups. "For companies like Who's Driving and others of similar sizes, the first few dollars in the Twin Cities are pretty hard to come by," Robinson said. "There is a pretty big gap in early stage funding."

The positive aspect of that gap, Robinson said, is that it tends to produce more sustainable startups and some of those successful startups have

drawn the attention of investors.

"The great news is that we have some pretty incredible momentum going right now," Robinson said. "We have new investors coming into town and investors in other areas that are recognizing the greater Minneapolis and St. Paul area as ripe for investment."

After the funding gap, Wilkie agreed to step back and become an adviser and Anne Cramer has stepped up to essentially become the company's CEO and shoulder more responsibility.

"Nobody wanted to wrap it up," Anne Cramer said.

They scrambled to find \$75,000 more in funding and a presentation at Beta.Mn's showcase in September led to some discussions with other popular applications on how Who's Driving could be integrated within their applications.

"Beta.Mn has been unbelievable in terms of the connections we've made," Cramer said.

"Because we are a startup and we have finite resources, we've been very diligent about where can we succeed," Paul Cramer said.

He said the app will be just one component of their overall larger vision.

"We see integration and connectivity to other apps," he said. "The technology foundation that Mark and his team have developed really gives us that ability to create very tight relationships or partnering opportunities."

"The people that have success in our showcases are those that clearly show a passion for what they are working on and are hustlers," Robinson

said.

It's the nature of startups that they sometimes have to take detours, but as of early this month the number of Who's Driving users has climbed to 2,232 in 43 states. Anne Cramer said more features and a marketing push are in the works.

"We are an agile business," Paul Cramer said. "We are going to work on instincts because we have a lot of instincts from past experiences, but we are going to react very quickly to market input."

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