

Give Nashville's bus system chance to meet rising demand

Today's topic: Should we put more resources into MTA?

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Our view

Advocates for enhanced mass transit in Nashville have long said the issue is more about the coming demand than just some feel-good endeavor that involves doing the right thing.

Signs of such demand are beginning to show in the city's bus service, and Metro leaders should do all they can to meet it.

The Metro Transit Authority reported more than 8 million riders in the last fiscal year, a record total, and among the problems to arise is overcrowding on some buses during peak hours. For many naysayers of mass transit, "overcrowding" is not a common term. Nashville's bus system historically hasn't had much of that problem. But for advocates of mass transit, overcrowding is a symptom of what many people see coming.

The city is beginning to see the crunch of highway traffic congestion and public transportation intersecting. High gas prices in the past couple of years have begun to change the habits of many drivers, and some of those drivers are beginning to wake up to the attributes of mass transit. Advocates of mass transit can make a lot of lofty arguments about why people should get out of their cars and get on the bus. But warnings about the environmental impact of too many cars and pleas for fuel conservation have limited effect. Only when individuals begin to see mass transit as a better way to go will Nashville see people abandon the highway and seek alternatives like public transportation. Record numbers being reported by MTA are proof of that demand.

In a time of growing everyday stress, mass transit can be a great stress reducer. Road rage tends to disappear. Conversations with strangers emerge. Riders can actually take time to notice the view along the way. And with enough consideration in how routes are designed, people may find they can actually reach destinations with minimal effort.

MTA deserves the chance to grow. Riders deserve the chance to see more frequent buses on crowded routes, especially at peak hours. MTA riders also deserve to see more routes beyond the major thoroughfares. They deserve a more comfortable experience when transferring from one bus line to another.

MTA is addressing the latter point with the planned Music City Central bus depot — a \$48.4 million terminal designed to replace the current main station on Deaderick Street downtown. The current facility is not exactly the most user-friendly service in Metro. While there is partial cover, the open-air station on Deaderick can make for some cold waits, and the site presents congestion of its own. The new depot, to be built adjacent to the Municipal Auditorium, is expected to be in use by fall 2008. The structure will provide indoor waiting areas with the potential for retail shops and

newsstands.

MTA officials are proposing operating budgets for the next year ranging from \$16 million to \$24.1 million. As funding is explored, it is important that the riders who have no alternative to public transportation be remembered in terms of fares and schedules. But increasingly, MTA is becoming a choice for people who do have the option of traveling by automobile. MTA has an opportunity to become the preference of those potential customers. Ideally, bus transit in Nashville should thrive because people view it as the most desirable option, not the last resort.

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