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Metro to try on-call van route

Service in Belle Meade, Green Hills aims at workers, children and seniors

By KATE HOWARD
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A new public transit option is coming to the affluent Nashville neighborhoods of Belle Meade and Green Hills — an on-call shuttle with nearly door-to-door service, all for the price of a bus ride.

Stops have been designated at nearly 60 sites between Belle Meade Boulevard and Hillsboro Pike — including the Belle Meade Country Club, The Mall at Green Hills and the St. Paul Senior Living Center — for the pilot project set to launch April 2.

Metro Transit Authority officials said they picked Green Hills to meet two needs: Many retail and domestic workers lost their rides to work when a major route was cut there two years ago, and traffic is heavy enough that some residents might opt to leave their cars in the garage and call BusLink instead.

"With this program, we can continue to provide a neighborhood service more cost-effectively and probably with a better quality of service," said Paul Ballard, Metro Transit Authority's CEO.

Running the single 16-passenger van will average about \$17,000 per month, much less than a 40-foot bus, transit officials said. And rides are free for the first month because Councilwoman Lynn Williams used her designated council funds to help offset startup costs.

"My hope is that people will adopt a lifestyle that involves public transportation," Williams said.

The target audience for the new service, according to marketing material, includes senior citizens, teenagers, domestic help such as housekeepers and nannies, and working professionals who live in the area.

Special area criticized

But not everyone likes the idea.

Daniel Hoover, an Antioch resident who rides the bus daily, said he sees "transit discrimination" in the new service if it's aimed at just one group of neighborhoods.

"The bus is paid for by every person in Davidson County," Hoover said. "The group they should be providing for is Nashville, not just school kids or nannies or maids."

The agency should keep its focus on crowded buses and expanding weekend and night service to make MTA a truly metropolitan system, he said.

"I understand they're trying to bring service to places with limited service, but all of Nashville has limited service," Hoover said.

Ballard, though, said that Green Hills is just the start for a program he hopes to expand. If BusLink succeeds, other routes could follow in Madison and similar spread-out neighborhoods because densely populated areas tend to have more access to major routes, he said.

Virginia Thompson of east Nashville isn't even sure she'd use such a system if it were available. But she supports it for the elderly, established residents of Belle Meade and Green Hills, especially because many of them no longer drive.

Thompson uses the bus almost daily, and she thinks she has great access in the populous east Nashville area. She doubts she would need the van service.

Van links to downtown

At a time more people than ever are using MTA, the agency has been wrestling with overcrowding on several routes. BusLink will start the same day as more trips on several crowded bus routes. Ballard said the overall result will be more service across Metro.

"This service is part of the solution to that (overcrowding) problem," Ballard said.

The option to connect to the Hillsboro or West End buses, which travel to the Vanderbilt University campus and downtown, might motivate some residents to try the service, Williams said.

"As the area becomes more densely populated, we'll be giving people more ways to connect," Williams said.