

RIVERSIDE TRANSIT AGENCY
1825 Third Street
Riverside, CA 92507

February 24, 2005

TO: BOARD OF DIRECTORS
THRU: Larry Rubio, Chief Executive Officer
FROM: Vince Rouzaud, Director of Purchasing and Materials Management
SUBJECT: Authorization to Install Satellite Television and Wireless Fidelity (WiFi) Internet Service in Three (3) Mid-Size Thomas Buses as a Pilot Program for Commuter Route 202

Summary: At the June 24, 2004, Board of Directors meeting, the Board authorized staff to exercise options for three, mid-size Thomas buses to supplement the existing fleet of commuter express buses. These buses are used exclusively on the "Commuterlink" express bus routes and include passenger amenities designed to attract the discretionary rider.

In response to low ridership on Route 202, in May of 2004, the Board approved a fare promotion and reduced the one-way fare from \$4 to \$1. This promotion went into effect on June 1, 2004 and has significantly increased ridership on Route 202. While Route 202's performance has improved, the fare promotion alone has not generated the ridership needed to sustain the route long term.

In an effort to further entice and attract discretionary ridership, staff is proposing the implementation of a pilot program for three buses used on the Route 202. This pilot program would include equipping the new Thomas buses with satellite television and wireless fidelity (WiFi) Internet connectivity. These enhancements are intended to improve the commute as well as enable passengers to turn non-productive commute time into more productive work time.

To make these services available, staff contacted and obtained competitive quotations from the following vendors:

Satellite Television

Thomas Bus Sales
Complete Coach Works
MSA Systems, Inc.,
Direct TV
Transit Television Network
Star-Band
Direct Way

WiFi Internet Service

MSA Systems, Inc.,
Cingular
T-Mobile
Ray Sat

Agency requirements included equipping each bus with six (6), flat screen, six (6) inch LCD monitors along with a servomotor-controlled satellite dish that would “continuously track” to make the satellite television reception possible while in route.

In order to provide a stable connection to the Internet, cellular service is also required. Each bus would be equipped with a WiFi network device that would utilize a cellular signal from a wireless services provider to connect to the Internet. This signal would then be broadcast inside the bus to provide the wireless connectivity to passengers. Bandwidth of 256K would be available to passengers via a shared connection enabling them to process low demand tasks such as checking e-mail, looking at news, researching stock prices, etc. This bandwidth should provide adequate services for 6 or 7 passengers connected simultaneously. Should ridership and demand for Internet access increase, additional modems could be added to supplement the available bandwidth.

The cost per-installation for both satellite television and WiFi connectivity including all equipment, labor and applicable tax, is \$15,660.65 per-bus. In addition to the capital cost, on-going operational expenses for both the satellite television and the wireless service provider would be approximately \$70 per-month per-bus.

Staff is recommending for this project a 12-month pilot program with quarterly progress updates provided to the Board. During the pilot program, several surveys will be taken to measure perception, usage, performance and importance of the systems in the mind of the customers. In addition, any available technical reports will also be utilized to measure system performance and usage.

Fiscal Impact:

Based on the per-unit price of \$15,660.65, the total project amount for the three (3) mid-size buses would not exceed \$46,981.95.

Project funding will be provided by FTA capital grant assistance CA-90-Y066.

Monthly operating expenses of \$210 per-month (\$70 X 3 buses) annualized over a 12-month period would be \$2,520. Assuming an April 1, 2005, implementation date, \$630 in additional operating expenses would need to be absorbed into the Agency’s current operating budget. Future expenses will be requested in next fiscal year’s budget.

Committee Recommendation:

This item was discussed that the Board Budget and Finance and Board Administrative Committee meetings of February 2 and February 9, respectively. The Committees’ members unanimously approved recommending this item to the full Board of Director for their consideration.

Recommendation:

- Authorize staff to execute a contract with Complete Coach Works for the installation of satellite television on three Thomas, mid-size buses in an amount that shall not exceed \$41,700.
- Authorize staff to execute a contract with MSA Systems, Inc. for the installation of a wireless fidelity WiFi connection on three Thomas, mid-size buses in an amount that shall not exceed \$5,281.95

Elk Grove's buses run late,try to shake glitches

By Loretta Kalb -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PST Tuesday, February 1, 2005

E-tran bus No. 52 bound for downtown Sacramento last week was ahead of schedule when two passengers alerted the driver that he had missed the turnoff to his Laguna Town Hall stop in Elk Grove.

An awkward U-turn later, accompanied by oncoming motorists blasting their horns impatiently, the bus was headed back to pick up waiting riders.

It's been four weeks since the city of Elk Grove, in a show of independence, dumped most Sacramento Regional Transit bus routes and launched its own service, called e-tran.

This was to be no ordinary bus service. The buses would have satellite TV and Internet access. The hybrid gasoline-electric commuter vehicles would be superior to diesel, providing smoother rides with minimal pollutants.

Even the name - e-tran - was intended to signify the extraordinary.

"We were looking for something innovative and something different," said city spokeswoman Michelle Smira, who called the name choice a marketing decision. "The 'e' can really stand for Elk Grove, or elegant, or efficient."

For some frustrated riders, the new service is anything but efficient. Though some cite recent improvements, others tell stories of long waits for buses, missed connections with RT, chronically late arrivals and drivers not trained to handle the gasoline-electric buses, which operate differently than diesel vehicles.

"I'm very disenchanted but not surprised," rider Santos V. Chavez said.

The Elk Grove resident used to arrive at his job at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in south Sacramento after a 20-minute ride aboard an RT bus. Now the trip can take an hour and includes a bus change from e-tran to RT at Cosumnes River College.

Elk Grove officials say they have heard from riders, too, especially in the first two weeks, and are working to fix problems such as the delays at the college.

Such complaints prompted City Manager John Danielson to draft Cedar Kehoe, the city's integrated waste program manager, to troubleshoot. He also told the private transit company running the system to improve driver training or lose the contract.

Nikki Frenney, a spokeswoman for MV Transportation Inc. of Fairfield, which operates the buses under a \$19 million, multiyear contract, said the company has followed through.

"As soon as challenges are brought to our attention, we do everything in our power to work with the city and the community to overcome them," said Frenney.

City officials say launching a transit system is no simple task.

"You are taking a new technology, all new routes and an entirely new transit system," said Elk Grove's Kehoe. "It's unrealistic to expect that we are going to open the doors on day one and not have any glitches."

In unveiling its new service last fall, Elk Grove officials promoted a system that would accommodate the growth expected in the city of 110,000. The city bought six intracity shuttles and a commuter fleet of 17 refurbished hybrid gasoline-electric buses for \$7.9 million.

Besides onboard TV, the buses would offer a wireless Internet line. The reclining seats would be comfortable, and routes would be more convenient than RT.

When the first vehicle was unveiled in October, Councilwoman Sophia Scherman boasted it was Elk Grove's "latest innovation."

But riders say they would trade the innovation for something more basic: On-time service.

From the start, drivers were unfamiliar with the routes and had no experience or training on the gasoline-electric hybrid engines. The buses accelerate slower than diesel buses, making it difficult for unprepared drivers to merge with faster traffic to reach the diamond lanes for transit vehicles.

And some of the promised amenities never materialized. The satellite TVs didn't work most of the time.

Elk Grove officials say one of the problems with the TV service was that thieves stole the antennae on the top of several buses. New ones mounted with covers will be inaccessible, they say.

But problems persist. There still is no target date for bringing on the wireless Internet link. Some riders say the reclining seats disrupt passengers behind them. Rear doors have failed to function. Some buses emitted fumes in the coach. Windows leak when it rains.

Kehoe said the causes of the fumes have been identified and the doors have been fixed.

On bus No. 52 from Elk Grove to downtown Sacramento last week, some riders were optimistic things will improve.

"I was impressed" with the new bus, said Alexandre Kimenyi, a professor of ethnic studies at California State University, Sacramento. "It looks like (the inside of) an airplane. It runs on time. I like it a lot."

On this day, however, the bus ran late, partly because of the missed Laguna Town Hall stop that required the driver to backtrack, and partly due to rain and heavy traffic on Interstate 5.

Bob Hare, en route to his job at the state Department of Parks and Recreation, offered support in spite of the problems.

"I think it's fine," he said. "They had some glitches in the first rain. The TV flickers. They did hand out earphones, but I have not seen people use them. I guess it was a waste of money."

Later, when the rain intensified, Hare pointed to the water running down the window frame and onto the papers on his lap.

"Mine is not a leak," Juan Riggins volunteered from her aisle seat in the row behind Hare. She had shifted from the window seat. "This is total rain" entering the closed window, she said.

Transit experts say the buses and service are bound to improve.

Training a bus driver can take eight to 12 weeks, said Lurae Stuart, senior program manager of bus technical programs for the American Public Transportation Association in Washington. It also takes time to tackle problems that surface in any new bus.

"Transit buses are not built on an assembly line. Every vehicle is built from the ground up" and it takes time to learn what works and what doesn't, she said.

Hybrid buses require early monitoring, too, "to get the right mix between engine and electric devices," said Stuart.

Kehoe said coordination between the gas and electric systems is one reason some buses move too slowly.

But diesel-trained drivers also needed to be taught the hybrid system.

In the last week, she said, complaints have dropped dramatically.

"We are through the worst of it," she said. "From here on out, it's going to get better."

TVs on way to local trains and buses

By: PAUL SISSON - Staff Writer

OCEANSIDE --- Televisions will soon begin appearing on local trains and buses.

For starters, the North County Transit district will install special flat-panel monitors on two of its Breeze buses and one of its Coaster trains in February to test passenger reaction to a new information system that will likely be installed on every bus and train in San Diego County.

The system, run by a company called Transit Television Network, will use sound and pictures to tell passengers what stop is next and where exactly the bus or train is on its appointed route. In addition, the system will broadcast a one-hour video loop of news, sports and other entertainment. That hour of entertainment will include 18 minutes of commercials.

The transit district will receive the equipment for free and will receive a percentage of the advertising revenue the system generates.

Brian Graham, the district's manager of operations, said the system is a cheap way for local public transportation to get automatic stop information that is useful to disabled riders --- especially those who are either deaf or blind.

"It's one less thing the driver has to worry about," Graham said.

He added that the demonstration project will be used to gauge passenger reaction to the system before it is rolled out on all of the district's buses and trains. The district's board of directors would have to vote to install the televisions systemwide.

Passengers on buses will be able to turn down the volume on the monitors but will not be able to silence them entirely. Each Coaster train with the system installed would have the sound disabled in its last car to create a quiet zone for passengers who do not wish to be distracted by continuous updates, news briefs and advertisements.

Graham said the system could generate between \$20,000 and \$40,000 in revenue in its first year of operation and much more in subsequent years. He said, however, that that money would be spread among all transit districts in the county, including the much larger Metropolitan Transit System in San Diego.

At a committee meeting last week, Karen King, the district's executive director, said installing the network should not be seen as a financial windfall.

"I don't think that it should be viewed as very much of a revenue generator, because the amount of money it will generate is really pretty insignificant," King said.

She added that the system's ability to provide constant location information and next stop announcements to passengers is its true strength.

"It really is an information tool more than anything else," she said.

Other cities have already installed the Transit Television Network including: Orlando, Fla.; Milwaukee, Wis.; Chicago, Ill.; Norfolk, Va.; and Atlanta, Ga. The Los Angeles transportation system is in the process of installing the system as well.

Contact staff writer Paul Sisson at (760) 901-4087 or psisson@nctimes.com

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WORKPLACE

Google's Magic Bus

A FEW LUCKY PEOPLE actually look forward to the daily commute. Just ask one of about 300 Google employees who regularly go to and from the Googleplex in Mountain View, Calif., on the company's free Wi-Fi-equipped shuttles.

NO ROAMING PENALTIES

Google project manager Cari Spivack, right, conceived of the Bay Area-wide busing program. "People have moved up to San Francisco because they know they can take the shuttle to work," she says.

TIME SAVER The biodiesel-fueled shuttle and its carpool-lane privileges can cut a 90-minute commute in half.

STAY CONNECTED Web access comes via a high-speed cellular data network and an 802.11g wireless router. "Riders tell me they're experiencing a boost in productivity," Spivack says. And, presumably, a lot less road rage.

— RACHEL ROSMARIN



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