

Chapel Hill Transit a free, simple service

Other options available for area travel

BY MAX ROSE
SENIOR WRITER

Chapel Hill might not be a big town, but it does have a public transportation system to rival one.

Many residents choose to bike or walk, but some choose the free bus system to get to their destinations.

Chris Fuhrmann, a graduate student in the College of Arts and Sciences, had never used public transportation before he transferred to UNC-Chapel Hill from UNC-Wilmington.

He now rides the bus back and forth from home every day.

"For all the routes that I've taken, it's been pretty efficient," he said as he waited for the bus on South Road.

The Chapel Hill transportation system became fare-free in January 2002 and now has 31 routes that stretch throughout the town, Carrboro and the University.

The three bodies pay for transit together based on census population counts, Chapel Hill Town Council member Ed Harrison said.

The University is the biggest financial contributor to the system. "Students and employees together have got to represent the majority of riders," he said.

The total ridership in 2007 was about 6 million people, Harrison said. That is up from about 3 million before the system went fare-free.

At a performance evaluation to

the council in March 2007, Steve Spade, town director of transportation, called Chapel Hill's transit system "head and shoulders above everybody else."

Freshman Brandon Prince rides the bus a few times every week to get his car, which he parks about three miles from his dormitory.

"Since I'm on North Campus, I don't have to go anywhere that's too far," he said.

The fleet of 99 buses includes

recently introduced hybrids to reduce gas use.

And the transit system might move toward more hybrid buses in the future.

Diesel, which most buses run on, has more than doubled in cost in the past four years, Harrison said.

"As the cost of fossil fuel goes up, they sort of pay themselves off faster," he said. "We're really trying to invest in getting rid of the older buses."

Last summer the Town Council upped the technology factor for the town's transit system by implementing NextBus Inc., a real-time

tracking technology that allows patrons to check their bus's arrival times from their computers.

The town awarded a \$950,000 contract to the California-based company to install the Internet sites, as well as on-site digitized signs at 14 bus stops that predict the buses' arrivals.

Harrison, who is active on transportation issues in his role on the council, is also an avid cyclist.

Fuhrmann said some alternative transportation is not as common here as in past places where he has lived.

"Students and employees together have got to represent the majority of riders."

ED HARRISON, CHAPEL HILL TOWN COUNCIL MEMBER

"Here you don't dodge many skateboarders because it's so hilly," he said.

But anyone who walks from South Campus will tell you that bikes are common.

"There are obvious concerns with bikers versus pedestrians and bikers

versus cars," said Adrienne Edwards, marketing and design coordinator for the Student Union.

"It gets kind of unnerving after a while."

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