

Waits for Howard buses to be shorter: In most of Columbia and in Ellicott City, riders can board every half-hour weekdays

By Larry Carson, The Baltimore Sun
McClatchy-Tribune Business News

1 April 2007

Apr. 1--Starting tomorrow, the wait for most riders of those bright green Howard Transit buses should get shorter.

Instead of arriving once an hour, buses will come once every half-hour on weekdays in most of Columbia and in Ellicott City. Some buses will start earlier, at 5:30 a.m., while others will run after 10 p.m., extending their schedule slightly.

The changes, which will not affect other parts of the system, have been meticulously planned over the past year with help from state and county agencies and try to address the most frequent request by riders -- less waiting.

Scores of riders gathered around a bright blue canopy erected Friday at the main stop behind Sears at The Mall in Columbia, where Sharon Smith, the bus system marketing director, and others distributed copies of the new schedules, answered questions and told riders that fares tomorrow and Tuesday would be 25 cents a ride instead of the normal \$1.50.

Herta Rauscher, a retired resident of Selbourne House apartments for seniors in Dorsey's Search, was pleased to see the changes, she said. On the old schedule, "I could not get to [Howard Community College] by 9 a.m."

She was headed Friday to her thrice weekly aerobics class at the Bain Senior Center in Harper's Choice.

"I go to Arundel Mills Mall, everywhere" by bus, she said, noting that she has ridden Howard Transit and its predecessors for two decades.

Other riders said they had to study the new schedules to see how the changes would affect them.

Several, such as Rachel Bradley of Bel Air, are long-distance commuters who could not get to work without the bus system.

Bradley commutes daily from Harford County to the Salvation Army offices in Columbia, a trip that takes more than two hours using a commuter bus to Baltimore, light rail to Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport and then two Howard Transit buses to her job.

"The nice thing is, it will help our clients," she said.

Sharon Wright of Owings Mills said her car was being repaired, so she was commuting last week to her office job in Clarksville by taking the Metro line to downtown Baltimore, then light rail to the airport, followed by two Howard Transit buses to her job.

"It's a nuisance," she said about the five-hour round trip that takes 80 minutes by car.

Hector Rodriquez, a community organizer for **People Acting Together in Howard**, a grass-roots social organizing group, said interest in more frequent bus stops was a major issue with senior citizens and young people. "We heard a lot about public transportation."

County officials were happy to see the long-anticipated changes take place.

"I think it's really positive, and I'm glad it's happening," said Carol Filipczak, chairwoman of the Howard County Transportation Board.

The new schedules have been translated into Spanish and Korean, she said, to help non-English-speaking riders.

"Our regular ridership needs to know things are changing," Ray Ambrose, the bus system administrator, said about the promotional efforts. "It's also a way to say thanks for going with us. Changes can be difficult, but the adjustments will help you," is the message, he said.

Ridership on Howard's 27-vehicle, fixed-route system has grown 64 percent since 2002, and officials say they expect about 757,600 riders in this fiscal year. Fares pay only about 10 percent of the system's cost, so Howard County spends about \$5 million a year in tax revenue to underwrite the system.

The buses are used mainly by people who cannot afford a private vehicle or do not drive, and they deliver a mixture of workers to retail, restaurant and warehouse jobs, students to schools, including Howard Community College, and senior citizens to medical appointments and shopping centers.

Despite increasing use, the system has been stymied on expansion because of rising costs. But the changes starting tomorrow will not cost Corridor Transportation Corp., the company that contracts to run the system, any extra.

Instead of all the system's buses leaving the central stop behind The Mall in Columbia each hour, some buses will start at different points, leaving on the half-hour.

That means they will hit stops more frequently in Town Center, Harper's Choice, Wilde Lake, Long Reach, Oakland Mills and in parts of Owen Brown, and they will start earlier and stop running later.

In addition, the route that covers a single loop around locations in Ellicott City will have buses going in both directions, again producing more frequent stops. A rider could board a bus going in either direction and still reach the same destination.

Those stops include apartments for senior citizens and larger general-use apartment complexes along U.S. 40, Long Gate Shopping Center, the Miller branch library and adjacent senior center, Normandy Shopping Center and Wal-Mart on Ridge Road.

Two of the color-coded routes will change designations. The Red Express will become the Silver route and one segment of the Brown route serving Owen Brown will become Orange.

Several riders at the central bus stop last week said they had heard about the changes from bus drivers but were eager for more details.

Patricia Rodriguez, 60, said she uses the Green route bus to get from her home in Clary's Forest to the central stop, where she transfers to the Red route to get to her job in Dobbin Center in east Columbia -- a 15-minute car trip that takes 45 minutes and one transfer by bus. She also uses the buses for shopping trips.

"It will help tremendously," she said as she waited just before 8 a.m. last week at the central stop for her transfer.

"We look forward to that half-hour," she said.

larry.carson@baltsun.com

Schedule information: 410-313- 3130, or [www.howardcommuter](http://www.howardcommuter.com) solutions.com.

Copyright (c) 2007, The Baltimore Sun

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Business News