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Buses may be key to keep growing region on move

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As the Sacramento region expands, the need to move workers from outlying areas to the heart of the city is on the rise.

Local transit services will soon respond to heated residential development in the south area of the county by extending the light-rail system and reconfiguring bus routes.

But as the region expands, it also is outgrowing the classic "hub-and-spoke" transportation system centered on downtown. Regional planners note expanding demand for public transit within neighborhoods, or from homes to job centers sprouting in the suburbs.

"In the past, commuter lines have simply been from suburban areas to Sacramento," said Nancy Kays, senior planner for the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, which plans regional transportation projects.

"With the growth of the region, the growth of commuting is happening in more and different places, because of job centers in outlying areas, such as Elk Grove, Rocklin and Roseville. We're seeing suburban job markets developing, which is creating more complicated travel patterns."

Actual numbers show a slight increase since 1998 in the number of riders on public transit at peak morning and evening rush hours. Transit officials and planners, however, see a need for more commuter options as traffic congestion rises along with concern about air quality.

While light-rail extensions have been highly visible, they are expensive, and commuter buses — possibly with special features to help them avoid traffic clogs — are likely to play a key role in expanding service.

Already, commuters from the rapidly growing Elk Grove area are packing into the five buses that go to downtown Sacramento before 9 a.m. and another five that return to the suburbs between 3:30 and 6 p.m.

"There is substantial demand in Elk Grove," said Bill Draper, public information manager for Sacramento Regional Transit, the city's primary public-transit service. "Some trips have standing room only. That tells us those trips are in demand, and there's growing interest in commuter lines."

Riders up 73 percent since 1985: Overall ridership on RT's 21 commuter bus and light-rail lines has dropped since last year. About 6 million riders got on RT buses during the morning commute in 2001, and 4.8 million commuters rode buses into suburbs during the evening rush hour.

Preliminary figures for 2002 show ridership on these lines at 5.7 million riders in the morning, and 4.7 million during the evening commute.

Since 1985, though, the number of people using all Regional Transit buses and light rail has gone up steadily and considerably, from 16 million riders in 1985 to a projected 27.7 million in 2002.

Michael Cassidy, a planner with Regional Transit, said economic conditions and gas prices affect commuter ridership numbers for public transit — for example, if there are major layoffs, fewer people are going to work. For example, he said that a slight decline in ridership from 1992 to 1993 could be attributed to the poor economy or a dip in gas prices. Alternative work schedules and telecommuting also are starting to affect the morning and evening commutes.

"All these state agencies and private employers are going to alternative work schedules," Cassidy said. Some employees are setting work schedules that allow them to take off every other Monday or Friday, or working four-day, 10-hour-a-day schedules.

In less than a year, RT plans to open the south line of the light-rail system, an addition of six miles from the existing line at 18th Street in downtown Sacramento to Meadowview Road, roughly following the Union Pacific railroad tracks.

RT is planning about six stops between Broadway and Meadowview Road.

"This will add thousands of passengers to light rail, and some of them will be new riders," RT's Draper said. He said the chief benefit of light rail is its speed to downtown. Light rail also is reliable, comfortable, has large parking lots at stations and destinations that are easy to identify, he said.

Bus transit service to Elk Grove and Laguna won't change initially after the light-rail extension, but eventually commuter lines will be shifted to complement the new light-rail extension and avoid duplications.

Looking northward: RT is focusing on the North Natomas area as one of future growth and public-transit options. The community wants light rail or bus rapid transit. Bus rapid transit uses a bus that can signal to change traffic lights in its path, to move through traffic more easily and quickly.

"With the new businesses and residential development, we're already seeing the interest and getting inquiries about North Natomas," Draper said. "We know growth is coming. We want to integrate the transit during development rather than playing catch-up or shoe-horning it in."

Rhonda Abell, executive director of North Natomas Transportation Management Association, believes that North Natomas potentially could become a world-renowned transit model.

"We have a big and wonderful opportunity," Abell said. "It's real hard to get people out of their single-occupancy vehicle and onto buses, light rail or into neighborhood electric vehicles."

The association is a community facilities district. Developers and homeowners pay a fee to the district, and Abell gets matching funds from grants to use for transportation systems.

Natomas community leaders set a goal to get 35 percent of its residents into an alternative mode of transportation, or cut emissions by 35 percent, and Abell said the community is very close to attaining that goal. About 26 percent of the master-planned community's 10,000 to 15,000 residents are using alternatives to single-occupancy vehicles for commuting.

"A vast majority, almost one-third, are telecommuting from home," said Abell, who operates the community facilities district. "Many of our neighbors are Bay Area transplants, and they learned the message a long time ago: Don't get in your car if you can work from home."

Buses have a future role: Kays oversaw SACOG's recent crafting of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan, a 25-year blueprint for traffic flows in Sacramento and adjacent counties.

She notes that public transit will play a bigger role in commutes, including extensions of light-rail systems that will link outlying counties with downtown Sacramento and beyond. New rail service is expected to take commuters from Auburn to downtown Sacramento, and then on to Davis on Union Pacific tracks by 2007.

SACOG also has identified three major corridors for bus rapid transit: Watt Avenue, Sunrise Boulevard and Stockton Boulevard. The buses will come soon to Stockton Boulevard as part of a demonstration project.

The group also sees a big increase in traditional bus service, primarily in Sacramento County areas, and car pool lanes on Interstate 80 up to Highway 65 to relieve congestion and provide a way for buses to maneuver through traffic more consistently, Kays said. A light-rail extension from Watt Avenue and Interstate 80 to Antelope is also envisioned.

Kays said SACOG planners are working under the assumption that Measure A, the half-cent sales tax in Sacramento County for transportation, will be renewed in 2009 and raised to two-thirds of a cent.

In general, it's tough to fund public transit, Kays explained. She said about 70 percent of transit services are typically subsidized and the remaining 30 percent comes from fares.

"People make rational choices about their trip, and if they have good options to driving, they will use them if it makes sense," Kays said.

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