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Buses Popular with College Students and Not Just for the Poor: Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

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It might not be the most glamorous means of mass transit, but Connecticut's 12,000-plus local and commuter buses form a vital link in our transportation network.

“We’re not just a service for the needy few,” said Greater Bridgeport Transit’s CEO Doug Holcomb, the feisty young leader of one of the state’s largest and most successful bus systems.

In other words, single-occupancy car drivers’ perceptions notwithstanding, it’s not just poor folks and the car-less who rely on the bus.

According to Holcomb, 90 percent of GBT’s ridership is either going to school or work. Like rail commuters, some bus passengers own cars, but prefer to take the bus for various reasons.

Each of GBT’s 40-foot buses average 30 passengers an hour, an impressive number when you consider it includes rush hour and lower-ridership times. It’s no wonder people take the bus when 78 percent of Bridgeport’s population is within a half-mile of a bus stop.

It’s the frequency of service that also makes buses attractive. Miss one bus and there’s another in a few minutes. The GBT’s bilingual website makes it easy to ride the bus with maps and tutorials for first-time passengers.

The bus company even offers a real-time online map that uses GPS to show where your bus is on its route. Not even Metro-North can do that.

The GBT [website](#) allows riders to input departure time and end points for anywhere in the state and bus alternatives and travel times will pop up.

Fares are cheap: \$1.75 for adults and just 85 cents for seniors. Yet, fares cover just 35 percent of the cost of the ride (the rest is subsidy). But by keeping fares affordable, the bus is attracting more riders and covering more of its costs.

Sure, Uber and lower gasoline prices are eating into ridership. GBT carries 18,000 daily riders compared to 20,000 just a few years ago. But the bus can take you places Metro-North can’t, like the “Coastal Link” route that runs from Milford to Norwalk along the Boston Post Road. At Milford, you can connect to New Haven. In Norwalk, you can get to Stamford.

Even the buses themselves are improving as transit agencies upgrade their decade-old vehicles. New buses are hybrid electric, not the old smoke-spewing diesels of years ago.

Connecticut is now engaged in a \$1.4 million study of all-electric buses, seeing if they can handle the cold and operate on our hills. One electric bus model can even recharge in five to 12 minutes while off-loading passengers at the end of its route.

One of the biggest bus successes in the state is CTfastrak, the nearly 3-year-old bus rapid transit (BRT) system running from downtown Hartford west to New Britain, and more recently, as far east as the University of Connecticut in Storrs.

The buses operate on a 9-mile dedicated highway and carry 400,000 riders each month on clean, sleek Wi-Fi-equipped buses that depart every seven minutes.

CTfastrak has proven popular with college students, so it's now considered "cool" to take the bus. Who knows? With millennials being big fans of mass transit, they could give our state's bus network a new uptick.

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Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.