



Even if not on time, it'll be online

By Jon Hilkevitch, Tribune transportation reporter

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When is that bus coming?

Any CTA customer who has a computer or a wireless device with Internet access soon will be able to find out using technology that the agency's board decided Monday to install on all of its buses.

A bus-tracking experiment that began in August 2006 on the No. 20 Madison route will be expanded systemwide, providing real-time bus-arrival information that should help commuters reduce their waiting times.

It will start by summer on 25 bus routes close to the Red, Brown and Purple/Evanston Express Lines, where capacity has been reduced due to reconstruction of tracks and train stations on the North Side.

By early 2008, the entire fleet of about 2,000 CTA buses, serving all 154 routes and more than 12,000 bus stops in Chicago and 40 suburbs, will be covered by the \$24 million Bus Tracker system, officials said. The CTA, they noted, is the first U.S. transit agency to deploy the device on such a large scale.

The technology uses global positioning system and communication devices on the buses to transmit bus location data and generate estimated travel times. Officials say it will help the transit agency reduce bus-bunching, which is one of the biggest frustrations for bus customers, who took 300 million rides last year.

"Right now, we don't know where our buses are. We only know where they are supposed to be according to their schedule," CTA president Frank Kruesi said. He said the Bus Tracker will "change fundamentally how buses operate."

Currently, CTA supervisors on the street use pen and paper to monitor bus operations. It's a largely unproductive exercise because any changes they make to fix gaps in service on a route are limited to what they can see from their post. Under the new system, the supervisors will have laptops they can use to see all buses on routes and order changes to maintain consistent service when congestion traps buses in traffic or an emergency occurs.

By linking to Bus Tracker, instead of wasting time waiting at a bus stop wondering when the bus will arrive, CTA customers may remain at the office or at home, working a few minutes longer or enjoying that last cup of Joe while calling up the Web site www.ctabustracker.com and seeing where buses are on their route.

Predicted arrival times, which are updated every 15 seconds to account for traffic flow and other factors, will be listed for the selected bus stop. Locations of all the buses on the route can be called up too, said John Flynn, CTA vice president for technology.

Also handy: Instant messages can be set to let a rider know when the bus reaches a designated stop on the route to give the rider enough time to walk over to the selected street corner.

Cell-phone text messaging will be incorporated into Bus Tracker in a later phase, Flynn said.

New bus-stop signs planned

The CTA also plans to install a limited number of electronic message signs at high-volume bus stops to offer estimated travel times for riders who do not have Web-enabled personal digital assistants, Flynn said. One such sign is at a bus shelter at Madison and Jefferson Streets as part of the No. 20 Madison pilot project.

CTA officials are talking to the city's bus shelter contractor, JCDecaux, about installing Bus Tracker signs in some shelters, Flynn said.

No counterpart for rail customers is under development, he said, although the CTA is testing a system to give the agency's control center real-time information pinpointing train locations. Currently, the CTA can monitor trains as they travel through signal blocks, but the process is not as accurate as using GPS satellite technology.

On Monday, the CTA board approved three contracts totaling \$24.1 million to expand Bus Tracker. The contracts are with Clever Devices Ltd., IBM Corp. and Sprint/Nextel.

Board holds off on new buses

The Bus Tracker deal was approved after the CTA board postponed action on a staff recommendation to spend about \$80 million on several hundred new buses to replace vehicles that are 16 years old.

CTA Chairwoman Carole Brown questioned the timing, saying she felt more comfortable waiting to see whether the state legislature comes through this year with new funding for capital improvements and transit operations.

Brown also said the CTA staff failed to do its homework to determine when New Flyer Industries of America Inc. could deliver the buses and how much more expensive the contract would be if the CTA decided to delay the purchase.

The CTA has received 424 40-foot, low-floor New Flyer buses in the last couple of years. The transit agency has options to buy as many as 1,050 of the buses.

About half of the CTA's 2,000 buses are more than 12 years old, the age at which the Federal Transit Administration advises that buses be replaced to avoid spiraling maintenance costs, said William Mooney, CTA vice president for bus operations.

Also, because of cost-cutting, about half the CTA bus fleet did not undergo the recommended midlife overhaul, Mooney added.

Meanwhile, the transit board said goodbye to Kruesi, 56, who announced last week that he is leaving the CTA after almost 10 years as president. Mayor Richard Daley nominated his chief of staff, Ron Huberman, 35, to the CTA post. The pick is subject to CTA board approval, expected next month.

"You may have disagreed with me. You may have disagreed with all of us. You told us you disagreed, and you didn't take it personally. That's a wonderful trait to have," board member Nicholas Zagotta told Kruesi.

Board member Charles Robinson, a minister, told the CTA board and audience, "I praise God for Frank Kruesi."

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