

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Round Rock to initiate intercity bus service

Routes would connect to Cap Metro park-and-ride in North Austin starting in October.

By [David C. Doolittle](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Wednesday, May 28, 2008

ROUND ROCK — For Austin resident Sally Decker, getting to work in Round Rock can be a struggle.

The 60-year-old, who is legally blind, must pay \$13 for a cab or walk several miles from her home off Red Stone Lane in North Austin to her job at A Resource Center for Independent Living at 525 Round Rock Drive West.

For Decker and the clients she serves at the nonprofit organization, public transportation to and from Round Rock would mean more freedom.

"There are independent living classes at the office," she said, "but if people can't come, they can't get the skills to be independent."

Round Rock officials have moved along their plans for local bus service and hope to launch one in October that will connect riders to Capital Metro services in Austin.

The service would plug into the Tech Ridge park-and-ride lot at 900 Center Ridge Drive in North Austin.

The city is still working out the details, said Tom Word, director of public works. Early plans call for buses to run for two to three hours in the mornings and evenings from two stops, one of which will be at a parking lot near the Baca Center for Senior and Community Activities, 301 W. Bagdad Ave. in downtown Round Rock. Word said the other stop will be near the intersection of Interstate 35 and Texas 45 North, where several major employers, including Sears Teleserve, Dell Inc. and Michael Angelo's Gourmet Foods Inc., are.

"That's an area where we have a lot of jobs," Word said. "You can draw a 1-mile circle around the 45-35 interchange; there are close to 15,000 jobs there."

Word said the service is expected to cost about \$542,000 a year. He said the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization approved a grant May 12 that will reimburse the city for 50 percent of the costs for two years.

The City Council plans to spend up to \$200,000 each of the next two years, said David Bartels, planning and programs administrator for the city's Public Works Department. Much of the rest of the money for the system will come from fares, which have not been determined, Word said.

"It's all going to depend on ridership," Word said.

Erica McKewen of Capital Metro said overall ridership in the entire Capital Metro service area increased 5 percent in the first seven months of this fiscal year, compared with the same period the previous year. She said park-and-ride use increased 12 percent during that time.

The bus service will be part of a long-range public transportation plan, Bartels said.

Currently, the City of Round Rock contracts with the Capital Area Rural Transportation System to transport residents from their homes to jobs and doctor visits by request for a fee. Bartels said the city will begin implementing a fixed-route bus service similar to Capital Metro's when Round Rock reaches a yet-to-be determined population.

Decker said she uses CARTS only in the afternoons because its morning service arrives at her house at 7:30 a.m., when she has to be at work.

Word said extending CARTS service is something the city could consider.

For the new connector bus service, the city could enter into an agreement with Capital Metro to operate the buses or contract with a third-party provider, Word said. The city is considering using 40-passenger buses, which would be owned by the operator, he said.

City leaders have been talking about providing bus service for several years

Some residents approached the city about a service, and several employers have asked about public transportation, Word said. In addition, a survey that the city conducted last summer found that some residents already drive to Tech Ridge, "so it makes sense if we could extend bus service into Round Rock," Word said.

The 33-acre Tech Ridge park-and-ride center, which opened in 2006, is one of Capital Metro's busiest, spokeswoman Misty Whited said. Seven routes connect to the facility, including the busy 1L/1M route that runs from Tech Ridge to William Cannon Drive and I-35 in South Austin.

Word said the city plans to begin by operating the bus service for two years, during which time it will monitor how many people ride the bus and what adjustments are needed. He said future plans could call for service to run to the northeastern part of the city, home to several medical facilities and the Round Rock Higher Education Center.

"We're eventually going to be a city of a quarter-million people, and demand and a need for services like this will expand," Word said. The city's current population is about 94,000.

"This is a good first step, and we feel it has a pretty good chance for success," he said.

ddoolittle@statesman.com; 246-0040

Open house

When: 6:30 to 8 p.m. today

Where: Baca Center for Senior and Community Activities, 301 W. Bagdad Ave.

What: Residents can ask questions about service and see displays of possible routes.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin