

Round Rock's bus service nears reality

City must replace CARTS, test new transit system

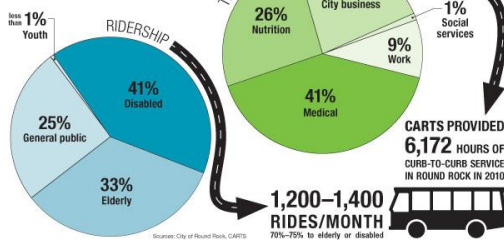
By Blake Rasmussen Friday, 03 June 2011

ROUND ROCK — This summer and fall, Round Rock will attempt to implement an estimated \$1-million-per-year public transportation system that city officials say could be a test for a larger system to come.

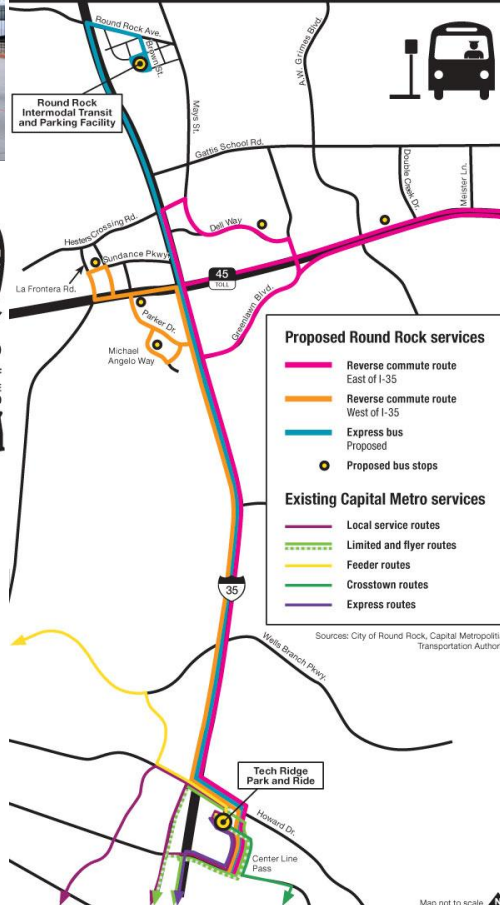


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FILLING A GAP: WHAT CARTS SERVICES PROVIDED
Feb. 2010 through Jan. 2011



Getting to and from Tech Ridge Park and Ride



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Map not to scale

The city is in the process of creating a peak-hours service with routes traveling to and from the Tech Ridge Park and Ride near Parmer Lane and I-35. The buses will serve thousands of riders who live and work in Round Rock.

At the same time, the city is looking to replace the on-demand—also known as curb-to-curb—busing service that has been provided by Capital Area Rural Transportation System (CARTS) for about a decade.

The growth in the city's population and subsequent demand for public transportation services have forced the city to begin examining its options.

"Round Rock will ultimately be 300,000 people. That's not too much smaller than the city of Corpus Christi today. Could you envision Corpus Christi, Texas, without some form of fixed-route transit?" said Tom Word, who ended his tenure as chief of public works operations for Round Rock on May 18. "That's possible, but that would be the exception to the rule as opposed to the norm."

Peak hours services

The first phase of Round Rock's new approach to public transportation is a peak hours—essentially rush hour—bus service linking the city's Intermodal Transit and Parking Facility and several major employers with the Tech Ridge Park and Ride operated by Capital Metro.

One route, the express bus service, will run from the transit facility in downtown Round Rock to Tech Ridge. The service is aimed at Round Rock residents who work in Austin or other cities accessible through the Capital Metro bus system.

Two other routes, one running on the east side of I-35 and one running on the west, are planned as reverse-commute services that bring people from Tech Ridge to major employment centers in south Round Rock, including stops near employers like Dell Inc. and Sears Teleserve.

"The reverse commute and the express, that's getting people to jobs," City Manager Steve Norwood said. "When gas is \$3, \$4 and \$5 a gallon, [and] you work in downtown Austin and you're going to a \$10-, \$12-an-hour job, ... you can eat a lot of that up just in gas."

David Bartels, Round Rock planning and programs administrator, said no fares had been set for the peak hours services, but that it would likely be \$1 to \$2 per trip, and that there could be reduced fares as well.

Bartels also said the city would likely provide a midday run around noon as a "safety valve" in case any riders needed to return home early to deal with sick children, for example. The midday run would hit all of the bus stops on the reverse commute route, instead of just the east or west stops, Bartels said.

Word said some of the impetus for the peak hours service came from the knowledge that around 20 percent to 25 percent of the riders who use Capital Metro transportation services at Tech Ridge are from Round Rock ZIP codes.

"The range of employment in south Round Rock goes all the way from executive positions at Dell to call centers at Sears [Teleserve] and food processing at Michael Angelo's," Word said. "So it runs that whole gamut of employment."

Testing period

The peak-hour services will likely cost around \$500,000 per year total, Bartels said. However, two grants from the Federal Transit Administration totaling about \$940,000 will help fund the routes for at least two to three years, a period city officials are calling a testing period.

“We’ve been talking about this for years, but [we did not want] to implement a full-blown transit service all at once [when] we weren’t sure of the success or the ridership,” Round Rock Mayor Alan McGraw said. “And so it’s always been talked about in the context of a test period of time to see how successful it really would be.”

McGraw said the testing period would last as long as the federal funds did, and that the service would have to be evaluated before the city chose to continue, expand or discontinue it at that time.

“I can tell you if one person is riding it, it’s not a success. Everything above that is that gray area that we just need to look at and see,” McGraw said. “We can’t just say, ‘Look, we’re providing public transportation; therefore, we are successful.’ We’ve got to have enough ridership to make it worthwhile to continue.”

CARTS discontinues contract

One service city officials acknowledge is worthwhile is the on-demand service that has long been provided by CARTS on a contractual basis. That service will cease in the city upon the conclusion of the current contract Oct. 30, barring month-to-month extensions through the end of 2011.

CARTS typically only serves cities and rural areas with populations below 50,000, but it has contracted with the city since after Round Rock crossed that threshold with the 2000 census.

However, as the city’s population neared 100,000, the demand outstripped the resources available, and CARTS informed Norwood in a letter dated May 10 that it did not intend renew their interlocal agreement after it expires this year.

“We were not interested in renewing the interlocal agreement and explained to [the city] that we would extend to them the service on a month-to-month basis until the close of the calendar year,” CARTS General Manager Dave Marsh said.

According to reports the city issues on CARTS ridership in Round Rock, CARTS’ on-demand service in Round Rock gives approximately 1,200 to 1,400 rides per month, about 70 percent to 75 percent of which are given to the elderly or disabled.

“I think it’s very important to be able to service the segment of our population that needs a safety net like that,” McGraw said.

“I mean, it can literally be a life-or-death service for somebody that needs to get to dialysis, somebody that has to get to the doctor, somebody that has to get to any number of critical destinations,” he added, “and those are the ones I’m most concerned about.”

According to the May 10 letter, when the contract expires at the end of October, CARTS will work with the city and any new transportation vendor to provide “a smooth transition for the customers of the service.”

Marsh also pointed out that the decision not to renew CARTS’ agreement with the city will not affect other services provided in the city. According to the May 10 letter, those include but are not limited to Medicaid-

eligible medical transportation services—through a contract with the Texas Department of Health and Human Services Medical Transportation program—and subscription-route service to congregate meal activities at the senior center.

Replacing CARTS

“I hope there’s not much of a gap in service time because those of us that use it use it all the time,” said Karen Choate, a frequent user of CARTS services who has had multiple eye issues that keep her from being able to drive. “It’s sort of scary, because we might be kind of dangling out there.”

The city plans to replace CARTS services through a third-party vendor, likely the same vendor who provides the peak-hours bus services.

However, such a transition may be prove difficult.

For one, Word said that getting a new service up and running by the time the contract expires puts the city on a short timeline.

“This is a safety net for our community; it’s what gets these people to doctor’s appointments and to pick up groceries and to get to dialysis,” Word said. “We’ve got to move fast if we’re going to get that service up and running in time to take the place of CARTS.”

Marsh said the transition period CARTS has offered through the end of the year should provide enough cushioning in case the city is not able to have the service up and running by the end of October.

Still, the greatest cost may be the financial one.

Bartels called CARTS “extremely inexpensive” at \$50 for each service hour. At about \$300,000 a year for just over 6,000 service hours, CARTS was essentially giving the city a discount on its services, Bartels and Word both said.

Word estimated that a replacement service provided by a third-party vendor would likely cost about \$500,000. Some of that may be eligible for federal funding, but none has been lined up yet, Bartels said.

Looking to the future

As Round Rock continues to grow and heads toward Word’s predicted 300,000 threshold, city officials are beginning to consider the future of transportation in the city.

“I think at some point in time it is appropriate that the city look at providing fixed-route transit,” Word said. “Now, when? It’s not this year. And it’s probably before 50 years from now, and somewhere in between is the answer.”

Choate said she believes a fixed-route service would be used by other CARTS customers she knows.

“When I’ve ridden, it seems like a lot of people use it to go to Walmart and the grocery store,” she said. “It would be nice to have something that included Clay Madsen [recreation center] and grocery stores ... and the outlet mall and Target area.”

But that time, officials say, will not likely come in the next few years.

“It’s going to be at a time when the community as a whole is ready to support it because it will cost money,” Word said.

Word estimated a four-route, fixed-route system with an express service and some on-demand transit like CARTS currently provides would cost the city around \$2.5 million to \$3 million a year, some of which would be eligible for federal funding. By comparison, the services starting this fall will likely cost about \$1 million per year, Bartels estimated, and much of that is federally funded.

“Even with the federal funding it would take a significant local subsidy to accomplish that,” Word said.

Norwood agreed that the future of transportation in the city was a fixed-route service with regular stops throughout the city, but that creating a transit system almost out of nothing could be difficult for a mid-sized city like Round Rock.

“It’s tough to pull off a fixed-route system when you’re a population of 100,000. It’s tough to pull that off when you’re 500,000,” Norwood said.

City officials are already discussing potential regional solutions that would include other cities in Williamson County.

“There have been conversations with members of the Commissioners Court because other cities in Williamson County have the same issue we do that they’re not rural anymore, but they grew up on CARTS as a rural system,” McGraw said.

Still, he cautioned, the city will not really know what the future holds until this first phase is fully tested.

“Just keep watching,” McGraw said. “We’ll see what happens.”

Courtesy of JB Goodwin