

The bus stops here

By Steve Clark (Contact)

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Capital Area Transit System officials were only following instructions from consultants when they told LSU it was going to cost almost a million dollars more each year to continue providing the same bus service to the university as it has for more than three decades. LSU's response was to cut routes to offset the extra cost, then hire a consultant of its own to explore other options.

Those options could mean the beginning of the end of the 34-year-old relationship with LSU—unless CATS manages to hang onto the contract. Not a fatal blow, perhaps, but still a \$2.4 million-a-year dent in revenue stream of the bus system, which has an annual operating budget of about \$16 million. A third of its revenues come from state, city or parish funds.

Losing its lucrative contract with LSU would force dramatic changes to CATS that would erode service—already characterized as “bare bones” because of an insufficient operating budget in last year's study of the system by HDR Engineering, which recommended renegotiating contracts with LSU, Southern and Baton Rouge Community College.

Gary Graham, the director of LSU's Office of Parking, Traffic and Transportation, says his office has fielded a rising number of complaints in recent years regarding the quality of CATS service, especially its on-time performance and professionalism of some of its drivers.

That hasn't always been the case. Graham, who's held the job for 26 years, says sororities even staged driver-appreciation days complete with snacks, something he thinks demonstrated “a connect” between drivers and students. CATS still has snack-worthy drivers, he adds, though there are plenty of exceptions lately.

“There are a lot of drivers that just don't seem to care, and the students are picking up on that,” Graham says.

Then came CATS' request for more money, made more urgent by rapidly escalating fuel prices. The bus system's retooled estimate to provide service to LSU jumped from \$58 to \$84 an hour for the next contract year—an increase of almost \$1 million. LSU trimmed 10,000 hours of bus service to offset the additional cost.

“A lot of things came together, then when you throw in the 25% increase in fees, that sort of pushed it past the tipping point,” Graham says. “We're not getting the quality of service, we're paying a lot for it and now it's going up considerably. We just need to see what else is out there.”

Graham's office is in the process of hiring Atlanta-based Solstice Transportation Company to survey students and get some idea of what the university should be looking for in a transit system. Once the study is done, LSU will issue a request for proposals. CATS is free to submit a proposal, as is any regional, national or even international transit provider, Graham says. First Transit and Veolia Transport are two of the big names that could submit.

He notes that today's students expect certain perks with their transit, such as Web-based GPS access to track the location of a particular bus at any given time, or the ability to text message a complaint about service rather than having to phone it in.



IN TRANSIT: CATS retooled its estimate to provide service to LSU for the next contract year, an increase from \$58 an hour to \$84 in part as a response to rising fuel prices. LSU trimmed 10,000 hours of bus service to offset the \$1 million additional cost and said there have been complaints about on-time performance and the professionalism of some drivers.

Several university transit systems around the country have that kind of service, including Alabama, Auburn, Stanford and Texas.

“Obviously you have a more wired-in generation now,” Graham says.

John Denman, CATS chief executive officer, acknowledges problems with service and that the bus system hasn’t always been prompt in addressing complaints. But he doesn’t want to lose the LSU contract and says the system is capable of doing what it takes to keep it. If they do part ways, it won’t be until July 1, 2009, when the current contract ends.

“I’m not trying to say we was doing everything right every time, but we want to straighten it out,” Denman says. “We want to make the service what it needs to be.”

CATS plans to hire another consultant to find out what the community wants in a bus system, what various levels of service would look like and what it would cost in each case. As for LSU’s shock over having to pay so much more for service, Denman says the hike was necessary so CATS wouldn’t lose money.

“The cost per hour that we quoted them is what it costs to provide that service,” he says. “There’s no frills to it. That’s actually what it costs. We’re not making any profit. It does not include any capital equipment that we have to use in order to that service. All that equipment is on CATS.”

Denman says he hopes to have a request for proposal out for the next consultant’s study within a month or two. Losing LSU wouldn’t kill CATS, but it would force harsh changes, he says. The bus system would be forced to let go as many as 35 of its 200 employees, starting with drivers.

“It would make a big difference in our operation,” he says. “We would have to do some real evaluation of the total number of employees that we have working here. It’ll be kind of rough for us. But if that happens, we’ll just have to move on.”

Denman says Chicago and other cities with widely used transit systems have dedicated funding for those systems. CATS doesn’t, which means it’ll have a hard time attracting ridership beyond those who absolutely have no choice but to take the bus. In June, CATS brought in just \$354,000 from passenger fares—a drop in the bucket.

“Bus service, in my opinion, is economic development,” Denman says. “We may say, ‘Let the people who ride pay for it,’ but if we have a good service it could benefit everybody.”

Former CATS chief Dwight Brashear, who has traded charges with Denman over the blame for financial irregularities that turned up in an audit last year, says CATS officials and staff are “doing the absolute best they can with what they have” but that “Baton Rouge really needs to figure out how important transit is.”

Brashear, who ran CATS for three years until taking a job with Fairfield, Calif.-based MV Transportation in 2006, says he tried to drag the system into mainstream respectability during his tenure but was stymied in part by a lack of official commitment to improving the system. Without a political champion, progress will be slow, he says.

“It’s the limited resources that they have that make the system very difficult to grow and to create a system that’s going to attract what we call the choice rider—the rider that has a choice,” Brashear says. “If you take care of those people, then everybody benefits from it. People that are transit-dependent benefit when you raise the level of service.”

Losing the contract with LSU would deliver a “very hard blow” likely to be felt throughout the already threadbare system, Brashear says.

“I can’t see how losing that would not change the level of service that’s being provided elsewhere.”