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**Express buses gain favor as gridlock grows**  
**Fayette is only holdout, but transit seems inevitable. 12 counties have signed on.**  
**Christopher Quinn - staff**

Resistance is waning to express buses that connect the suburbs with downtown Atlanta.

Now more than ever, drivers want alternatives to hours behind the wheel — often stopped in interstate gridlock — and gasoline prices that continue to hover around \$2 a gallon.

Four years ago, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority offered 13 metro counties the opportunity to run express routes to Atlanta. Within six months, 11 counties had signed on, but Cherokee and Fayette counties declined. Yet in November, the Cherokee County commissioners voted 3-2 to help pay for buses that run from parts of Cherokee to downtown Atlanta and back. And the Cherokee bus line launched last week.

Now Fayette is the only holdout.

One of the recent riders, Tony Berwald of Woodstock, read and caught up on work while on the bus. He figures it costs him \$13 a day in gas and parking to drive from Cherokee to his job at Georgia-Pacific downtown. The bus charges \$5 for a round trip — and he said Georgia-Pacific pays most of that.

"People think I am crazy to commute downtown, and I tend to agree," Berwald said. "But if you have to be downtown for your job, then this is the way to go.

"Most are unaware that there even is a bus service. Metro Atlanta is not good about using [transit] or are even open to it," he said.

The new buses replace a more limited express service that Canton and Woodstock contracted with Cobb Community Transit to provide last year. The cities will still kick in \$100,000 each for the new GRTA service, and Cherokee County will pay \$300,000 over three years.

Harry Johnston, a Cherokee County commissioner, voted against express bus service, saying \$300,000 was too much to pay for it and that many people in Cherokee didn't like the idea of links to Atlanta.

"Those of us who moved out to northern Cherokee County, beyond the suburbs, are looking to be separate from Atlanta, to the extent we reasonably can," he said. "Now, resistance is declining. When I was elected in 2002, it was very strong."

Even Johnston's opposition is eroding.

"I am considering that mass transit might ultimately be part of the solution, but I am not

quite there yet," he said.

Exurban counties have long resisted mass transit.

Cobb and Gwinnett voted against joining the MARTA system when it was created. County leaders argued for years that overdevelopment, higher taxes and crime follow mass transit.

More recently, other metro counties have phased in express bus service. Routes now go from downtown Atlanta to cities that include Cumming, Newnan, Conyers and Hiram.

Boardings have grown from more than 17,000 in December 2004 to more than 47,000 in January 2007. A boarding represents one rider stepping onto or off a bus for a ride into or out of downtown.

The increasing ridership is one reason GRTA plans to add eight routes this year. The routes will ferry riders from parts of metro Atlanta to and from downtown, Perimeter and Cumberland.

Greg Dunn, who served as chairman of Fayette County's board of commissioners until January, said he resisted express bus service because Fayette has no interstates for them to use.

"You couldn't take a bus out of here faster than [you could] anything else," he said.

As in Cherokee, many residents told him they didn't want the service.

The new chairman, Jack Smith, said the express bus issue has not come up since two new commissioners took office last month.

"That doesn't mean it won't come up," he said, "but there's been no discussion so far."