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Local commuters fill up buses, not gas tanks, as prices soar

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Traffic was what drove James Fondon eight years ago to let Cobb County Transit do the driving on his daily commute from Marietta to his job downtown with the U.S.

Department of Agriculture.

Today, record gas prices are what's keeping him on the bus and has a growing number of other metro Atlantans hitching a ride with the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, leaving some buses with standing room only.

Every day, Fondon, 52, looks out with from the window of his bus at the motorists clogging the highway.

"I feel for them," Fondon said.

Andrew Jackson, who began using Xpress this week at a fare of \$5 a day, figures the \$75 a week she would otherwise spend on gas looks better in her pocket than in a service station's register.

The average price for regular gas locally hit \$3.409 per gallon on Thursday and reached \$3.79 in at least one metro location, according to AtlantaGasPrices.com, which relies on reports from motorists. The national average, the Web site said, was \$3.437.

"It's too much, and I drive a truck," said Jackson, 34, a technical assistant who cited traffic and helping the environment as additional reasons. "In this case, I'm saving a lot. That pretty much says it all."

The cost of a monthly, suburb-to-downtown, regular adult bus pass is \$80 for Xpress, \$90 for Cobb Express and \$100 for Gwinnett Express, according to the systems' Web sites.

The transit authority welcomes the uptick in popularity of its GRTA Xpress bus service and its express routes operated under contract by the Cobb Community and Gwinnett County transit agencies. It doesn't welcome the consequence —crowding.

Transit officials predict the situation will get worse before it gets better. Gas prices continue to climb. And Georgia lawmakers ended the legislative session earlier this month after rejecting Gov. Sonny Perdue's 2009 budget request for the \$13.3 million the GRTA needs to add 28 coaches to its current fleet of 127.

The authority says it can't add buses to its crowded Xpress routes or continue its planned

service expansion, which would include more "Park 'n' Ride" stations, without modifying its current service plan, said Robert Alexander, the agency's customer service director.

The GRTA on average serves about 5,400 passengers a day on 26 express routes. From 1.1 million total passenger boardings in the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2007, the authority is on pace to show 1.7 million boardings this fiscal year — a 55 percent increase.

MARTA officials were unable Thursday to provide similar information on ridership increases, if any.

Georgia Regional plans to make another request for the needed funding next legislative session. Even if the authority receives the money, it could take up to a year to get new buses on the road, officials warn.

"It going to be tough," said William Mecke, a GRTA spokesman.

"We're going to do our best with what we have. That's where we are right now. ... We're hopeful for next year."

Meanwhile, the authority is studying changes it can make to relieve crowding but has begun informing customers that the problem may be around for a while.

"We got zero," Alexander said of the Legislature. "We're facing the very clear prospect of having people standing on our coaches."

That's already a reality on Xpress Route 432 from Stockbridge to downtown. The route, which operates out of a new transit station at I-75 and Ga. 138, reached capacity for 7 a.m. departures about five weeks after its Feb. 4 start.

On some trips last month, some Stockbridge riders had to stand in the aisle of the 57-passenger coach during the ride of more than 20 miles.

The problem also has occurred on other metro routes, such as those serving Conyers, Doraville, Douglasville, Johns Creek, McDonough and Newnan.

The legal limit for the number of standees per bus is 15.

Cheryl Cooper, a Stockbridge customer, wants the GRTA to fix the problem — yesterday.

"We need another bus," Cooper grouched. "This one is crowded. I feel cheated."

DALE E. DODSON / Staff SAVING MONEY Survey results suggest that gas prices are the main reason cited by commuters for using GRTA's Xpress bus service. LESS EXPENSIVE 2008: 53.9% 2006: 45% TRAFFIC 2008: 29.2% 2006: 23% Source: GRTA