



Point A to Point B

Local transit system serves those outside the status quo

By: David Alexander - March 30, 2013

On just about any given weekday afternoon, the Marshalltown Municipal Transit's orange route is mostly empty. The blue route too. In recent years, the system has seen ridership trending up, but so has the money spent on the transit system.

A 2010 study by the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank based in D.C., shows that the number of workers needed to operate mass transit systems has increased by 180 percent since 1970. Over the same period, the inflation-adjusted cost of operating those types of transportation has increased 195 percent.

Ridership has only increased 32 percent.

But the hundreds of people who rely on the bus every month have few options. Without the transit system, their lives would be substantially inconvenienced.

Danielle Davis is 33. She has three little girls, ages 3, 5 and 7, and works in the Iowa Veterans Home cafeteria. She said her car broke a few months back, and she has no money to fix it. She takes the red or orange route, which services the northeast part of town, most everywhere she goes.

"It's cheaper to ride the bus," she said.

"It's better than a cab," said Tye James, 30.

The wait isn't long, he said. James is a forklift operator at JBS. He said he takes the bus most days, unless he can find a friend to give him a ride. He has to plan his day around the bus schedule. He just wishes it ran on the weekend.

Interviews with multiple bus patrons reveal the notion that the bus is less expensive than driving to be a common one. Patrons pay \$1 per trip or can purchase passes for the month at Hy-Vee, Hy-Vee Drugstore or City Hall. However, while the fare is a small amount of money when compared to the cost of gas, that claim ignores the cost of subsidies to the transit systems.

Another Cato briefing compared the costs of different forms of travel in 2008. The brief shows auto owners spent 22 cents a passenger mile, and subsidies to highways increased that cost another penny. Meanwhile, urban transit systems average about 21 cents a passenger mile, but another 72 cents a passenger mile in subsidies makes public transportation four times as expensive as driving.

That inefficient cost arises because public transit, unlike private, urban transit systems, aims to serve all areas of town, not just those areas people frequent most often.

Marshalltown's system operates on a budget of just over \$600,000. The funding sources break down as follows: passenger fares of \$115,000, \$161,000 federal funding, \$152,000 state funding, and \$180,000 in local transit levy.

Rich Stone, transit administrator, said providing public transit is a matter of giving options to people who can't or do not want to drive, regardless of the dollars and cents. Eliminating the bus system would unduly discriminate against the poor, he added.

"What it comes down to is I am serving a segment of the community that is not completely self-sustaining," he said. "Most of the time (they) can appear to be pretty close to invisible."

Locally, the bus system has a fixed route system like larger cities such as Atlanta, meaning it travels along its five prescribed routes, each named with a color: red, orange, blue, purple and green. Each of the routes serves a different area of town Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. The municipal transit also provides special services for school children who live outside the school's bus service area. It also provides special service for those who cannot interact with the fixed route system, including moving dialysis patients.

Lisa Fogarty lives on State Street. Her 12-year-old daughter Hannah takes the bus to school. Fogarty is on disability and takes the bus nearly everywhere she goes - to Walmart, to the bank, to church. Her daughter takes it to swim practice. She is on a first-name basis with all the drivers. She said she used to live in Des Moines and rode the bus there.

"Marshalltown is way better," she said of the bus system. "It's very convenient."

Fellow bus patron Betty Crough said she takes the bus because she doesn't have a license. She has never had one. For her, it's not so bad having to take into account the bus schedule. She said she knows when the bus runs and knows when she has to be ready.

The Marshalltown Municipal Transit employs two full-time, one three-quarter time and seven half-time bus drivers to drive the nine buses in its fleet.

Marilyn Schultz has been driving for the city for nearly 2 years, but has been driving a bus for nearly 20 years. She used to drive in Topeka, Kan. Although the bus is full during the morning hours when people are heading to work, during the afternoon it is sparse.

Stone said the average bus seats 26 people and another 13 or so could comfortably stand. With the exception of the purple route, the buses run 135 miles a day.

Common destinations include the mall, Walmart and Kmart, Schultz, who prefers to go by her bus number - 816, said. She does it because she likes driving. Although she does not yet know it, her bus is on route to pick up Davis, who needs to go to Fisher to pick up her kids.

As 816 makes a turn to the northeast loop of town that circles JBS, it approaches another rig. Schultz waves at her fellow driver, 812, whose bus also appears mostly empty, before stopping. She says driving in circles all day can get boring, so the drivers occasionally chat if they are running ahead of schedule.

"I can't keep up with you," 812 says.

"Are you trying to?" Schultz jokes.

The two share a laugh. A few minutes later, Davis boards the bus. She slides a wrinkled dollar bill into the fare acceptor.

"How you doing?" Schultz asks her.

"Not too bad," Davis says.

"Glad I got a customer," Schultz says.

In 2012, the Marshalltown Municipal Transit System provided 111,586 rides. Stone said ridership rises and falls depending on the time of year. Summer months are typically slower than the winter months. In January, the system averaged 397 rides a day.

While cost-benefit analysis might show that less than 1 percent of people use the transit systems, Stone said the bus system is for people who do not have any other choice. It's for the guy who lives at the group home, who doesn't have a license. It's for the woman too old to drive but still healthy enough to live at home. It's for blind, for those who have had their license revoked and for anyone else who needs it.

"Choice is kind of the big thing here," Stone said. "City government does what the private sector cannot make money at."