

Carrying on with innovation

A short history of the University of Georgia Campus Transit System

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The University of Georgia’s Campus Transit System has a long history of innovation and change in response to campus and student population growth, changing values and a commitment to provide the campus community with a reliable, safe, clean and friendly transportation service.

The University of Georgia Campus Transit System was created in 1966 to help move students around a campus that was growing, and in response to parking that was becoming more remote and as the “boomer” generation entered college in record numbers, putting a strain on the resources of the University. In the early years, the system operated one route with five surplus military school buses, carrying about 800 passengers a day. For the first five years, the system was funded by a 5¢ fare collected in cigar boxes on the dashboard of the bus, and was supplemented by parking fines and vending revenue. The city of Athens, in which the University is located, did not provide public transportation at the time.

Two years later, in the fall of 1968, the University’s system was operating nine buses on three routes and carrying 8,000 passengers a day. Brand new buses had arrived to supplement the original fleet creating an opportunity to expand and improve services. A year later, the system added two more new buses, continuing the expansion and allowing the retirement of the original military surplus buses.



Ready To Roll

University campus transit employees (from left) John Baker, C. W. “Red” Jaynes, Seth Hunter and James Farmer, ready some of the University’s new buses for duty. The buses, which are part of a traffic control plan, will increase the regularity of the bus schedule. The four new vehicles bring a full stable of 18 for the University.

Transit Upgrades, Improves Service

In 1972, fare-free bus service was implemented, allowing for more efficient boarding and departure of the buses. A mandatory student transportation fee was established to replace the nickel fare and to supplement other revenue sources which continued to provide funds for operation and capital improvement in the system.

In 1978, public transportation returned to the city of Athens with the rollout of the Athens Transit System, providing service to many parts of Clarke County. From the beginning, the Athens Transit System had the support of the student body. The student government association authorized an increase of the transportation fee to support the county-wide system. Since that time, University of Georgia

students have been provided fare-free access to Athens Transit on all services and routes they operate. The original agreement between the University and local government provided that Athens Transit would be paid a fixed fee for each student enrolled at the University.

Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, the availability of Campus Transit services continued to expand to more areas of campus while the frequency of buses on routes was increased in response to student comments as the fleet grew to twenty-eight buses.

The year 1981 brought the first experimentation with biofuel at the University's transit system. Agricultural engineers at the University were testing the use of peanut oil as a fuel and Campus Transit provided two buses for their use. Students, staff and faculty who were on campus at the time claim that there was the distinct odor of roasted peanuts as these buses moved around. The experiment demonstrated the possibilities of fuel derived from vegetable oil but proved to be uneconomical relative to the cost of petroleum-derived fuel.



Up until 1990, the transit system was operated by the University's Physical Plant Department and funded by the Auxiliary Services unit which managed the student transportation fees that were collected along with additional income derived from other auxiliary units. Decision makers at the time felt that the chain of command would be cleaner and more distinct if the transit unit were turned over completely to Auxiliary Services. Plans were developed to move the transit system to its own facility, to be built on a site separate from the Physical Plant's Automotive Center from which it had operated since inception. The new facility would provide administrative, operating, maintenance and training facilities for Campus Transit, plus additional space for growth of the system.

The transit management team considers it important that students be fully involved in the operation of the system since they are its primary funding source. This leads to high levels of employee turnover as a fact of life. The system has long been considered one of the more elite and high-paying student jobs on campus. Students supplement the full-time bus operators, maintenance, dispatch and training staff, providing greater flexibility in scheduling, lower cost of operation, and an opportunity to provide a high paying job to those who provide the greatest investment in the system. To this day, the students provide over 90% of the funding for operations and capital expenses for the system. No state or federal funds are provided to the system.

Early in 1994, Campus Transit moved into its new facility which provided several key facilities. Plans for the new six-acre facility included a loop around the facility providing a driver training ground that allows new operators to begin their training in a controlled environment, out of traffic. The bus wash facility

includes water recycling, reusing 90% of the water used for vehicle washing. The maintenance facility was built to allow for the possibility of buses propelled by natural gas. Most importantly, the facility was built to allow for further growth of the system.

In 1990, the International Olympic Committee announced that the centennial Olympic Games would be in Atlanta. Officials at the University began to prepare for their arrival in Athens since the excellent athletic facilities available would be used for various events. The University provided facilities for athletes, officials and competitions. The Campus Transit System began another phase of growth as the campus built additional facilities in preparation for the 1996 Olympics. The small role Campus Transit played in the Olympic events proved to be highly regarded by participants, Olympic officials and the general public who made use of the transportation facilities provided. It made for many fine memories for those of us who were privileged to participate in the back lots of the event.



In the nineties, Campus Transit employees began involvement in the Georgia Transit Association, which promotes and advocates for public transportation in the state. An annual activity sponsored by the association is the Bus Operator Rodeo, where employees of transit agencies across the state compete in safety skills

and bus operation. Campus Transit employees, notably including students, have placed in the top three on twelve occasions and have finished in first place four times over career bus operators, demonstrating the extent and effectiveness of our safety and training program.

In 1997, Athens Transit requested a change in the University's contract which provided that the University would pay for each rider carried rather than the flat fee per student enrolled previously used. Once again, the idea was taken to the students who overwhelmingly passed the measure. The acceptance of this referendum further cemented the roll of transit in the successful movement of people to and through the University. It has also provided the basis for a good relationship between University and local government officials. Transit officials from each agency continue to work in a coordinated fashion rather than competitively to provide mass transportation to the University. Being only one area where the two town-gown entities interface, the relationship between the transit departments is frequently cited as an example of how other similar departments should interact.

In 2002, the University's Parking Services department implemented a revised parking plan whose objective was to eliminate the "hunting license" concept for campus parking resources. The new plan

called for a prioritized system of parking assignments, limiting the number of assigned participants to any given lot based on its use and allowing the prospect of a guaranteed parking spot. Lots which are more likely to be populated by housing residents, staff and faculty have a lower turnover rate than those whose primary role would be for commuter students. Lot assignments would be based on assignment priorities reflecting their best use as either a commuter student lot, staff/faculty lot, housing lot or in some mixed-use fashion. The new plan also called for a substantial increase in the cost of parking on campus which better reflected the demand for a limited resource. A point of capitulation for the department was to offer an alternative transportation program, one facet of which was to expand the availability of fare-free transit to staff and faculty. The result was a doubling of the number of participants on the Athens Transit System which has continued to this day.

With the availability of fare-free access to Athens Transit for University staff and faculty, a new dilemma was developed. Under the policy, Campus Transit would continue to pay for student riders from the student transportation fee while staff and faculty would be paid for by Parking Services. How to divide the ridership accurately between the departments, which operate individually and with separate budgets, became the new challenge. Our Athens Transit partners resolved the dilemma by installing new fareboxes that would accept the UGA identity card as a fare media, providing the collection of the data that would allow the proper allocation of the fare. The data collected is recorded and submitted to University staff for decoding and subsequently returned to Athens Transit for billing to the appropriate department.

The year 2003 brought a new purchasing contract for low-floor buses. This created an opportunity to refresh the look of the fleet and for employees of the department to put their skills to work in creating a new paint scheme. Campus Transit employees submitted 24 design ideas for the new buses, which ultimately led to the distinctive graphics now familiar on campus. When introduced to the campus, the design generated a lot of excitement and has generated numerous comments. It is especially unique as it was the result of an employee's creativity.



In April 2007, Campus Transit made the commitment to operate its diesel fleet on B20 fuel; in our case a mixture of 20% fuel derived from the local poultry industry and 80% petroleum diesel fuel. This change created at least two benefits, the first being the reduced environmental impact of lower levels of various pollutants, and the second being the economic benefit of 20% of the fuel being produced domestically as opposed to imported from foreign sources. The University's transit system

consumes about 300,000 gallons each year, so this change had the potential to reduce imports by 60,000 gallons of fuel. Technical difficulties and fuel consistency led to the end of this experiment after eight months.

Today, the Campus Transit System operates a fleet of over 60 vehicles, including 49 large, modern, heavy-duty transit buses carrying over nine million passengers a year. Employees of the system provide route service seven days a week on its nine routes, specialized van services for low-density routes and disabled members of the campus community, charter bus services to University departments and student groups, and an interlibrary mail service that operates into Atlanta three times weekly. The system carries more passengers than any other University operated system in the nation and is the second largest transit passenger carrier in the state. According to the National Transit Database report for 2009, Athens Transit operated an additional 25 vehicles carrying over 1.8 million passengers. A city of 106,000 generating nearly eleven million annual transit passenger trips between the two systems places this region in a class of its own.

