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Local News - Thursday, September 27, 2007

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It's time to look at transit options: Planning organization to hear citizens' input

By **ASHLEY FIELDING**
The Times
GAINESVILLE

If you run it, they will ride.

At least that's what Morris Boyd said he thinks about the Gainesville-Hall transit system. Boyd, a Gainesville resident, spends about an hour and a half commuting to work at the CNN Center in downtown Atlanta -- and that's on a good day.

Today, Boyd and others will have a chance to share opinions on public transit with city and county officials. The Gainesville-Hall Metropolitan Planning Organization will hold a public hearing so that Gainesville and Hall County folks can tell officials what they want out of the Hall area transit system. Boyd currently drives 22 miles to catch the Gwinnett County regional transit bus to work. He prefers the bus to driving through a city that has the second-worst commute in the country.

"The bus makes it so much better, because I'm not a nervous driver, but you just have to ... be so focused and paying attention to people coming and going and all the other idiots on the road," Boyd said. Boyd said he wants Gainesville-Hall to add a regional bus that could take him and other Hall County commuters to Atlanta, because it is better for the environment, would reduce the wear on commuters vehicles and would add to the commuter's quality of life.

"The biggest perk from doing this is reduced stress," Boyd said of riding regional transit to work.

Boyd said he thinks that a regional transit system might in Hall County might make Gainesville a more desirable place to live, and that city officials would be surprised at how many in Hall County would use the regional transit system.

"It would be a lot more successful than they would imagine," Boyd said.



Tom Reed The Times

Traffic backs up Wednesday along Jesse Jewell Parkway through downtown Gainesville. The road is one of the busiest in Hall County and is usually backed up at major intersections. A public hearing today allows folks to give their input on public transit.

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Srikanth Yamala, on the staff of the Metropolitan Planning Organization, said the group is taking a closer look at how it can improve transit in the Gainesville-Hall area, and in June the organization began a yearlong study on how to best address the transportation needs of Gainesville and Hall County.

"We hear several anecdotes about transportation ... saying 'Why doesn't Hall area transit run to Gainesville State College?' 'Why doesn't it go to downtown Atlanta?'" Yamala said.

The purpose of today's meeting is to help Yamala and the metropolitan planning organization better understand residents' needs, he said.

"We want to hear from them as to what their perceived transit needs are and how could Hall-Area Transit be helpful," Yamala said.

At the meeting, people will have the chance to tell the Metropolitan Planning Organization where and why they would ride Hall Area Transit, what areas they want the transit system to serve and what they are willing to pay to ride area buses.

Boyd said that he would like to attend the meeting to express his desire for a regional transit system, but he has a prior engagement. But he and others who cannot attend the meeting will not lose the chance to tell the planning organization what they want to come of the area's transit system, Yamala said.

Those who do not attend the meeting can voice their opinions on the transit system by filling out the Transit Development Plan survey on the Gainesville-Hall Metropolitan Planning Organization's Web site.

Yamala said it is important for people to let the organization know what they want in order to get what they need out of the area's transit system.

"The more we hear from them ... the better it will be for the community," Yamala said. "We will take all these recommendations back to the elected officials and they will do the final call."

The meeting will take place at the Georgia Mountains Center, and will last from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Those who cannot attend the meeting, but would still like to contribute to the conversation can fill out the survey at www.ghmpo.org.

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