

StarTran services fare well among regional bus systems

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UNL students, who account for nearly one-third of StarTran rides, have ridden for free since 1994. Before that, student riders paid \$25 per month for bus passes.

Not all buses are wheelchair-accessible, but route schedules indicate when buses that can accommodate wheelchairs arrive and depart.

Buses run weekdays from 5:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. on most routes. Saturday service is limited, and no buses run on Sundays.

Lincoln's city-operated bus service offers riders more options than the service in Lawrence, Kan. — KU on Wheels.

Nicole Skalla, transportation coordinator at the University of Kansas, said the only buses that run in Lawrence are supported by student riders.

KU's student senate operates the entire system.

Skalla, a KU student, said students are charged \$120 per year for a bus pass. The main purpose of KU on Wheels is to carry students to class.

Skalla said students relying on the bus system to get around "will have transportation to class, back to the residence halls and to the library" without any problems.

Skalla said a KU Safe Ride program gives students rides home between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m., hours when KU on Wheels buses do not run.

Buses do not run on weekends or during school breaks.

Skalla said KU on Wheels has no buses that are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Although StarTran compares favorably to KU on Wheels, Lincoln riders do not have many of the options available in Madison, Wis.

University of Wisconsin students are issued Metro bus passes that entitle

them to free rides everywhere except on campus.

Student riders account for 40 percent of all rides on the system.

Madison's population is approximately equal to Lincoln's, but the Metro system has more than five times the number of rides per year that StarTran does.

Julie Maryott-Walsh of Metro said that Madison has one of the best bus services of a city its size.

"We probably provide more service and carry more riders than most systems," Maryott-Walsh said.

Maryott-Walsh said riders generally had a good opinion of Madison Metro.

"People who live downtown and on campus gave us the highest ratings," she said.

Madison Metro operates more than 175 buses. StarTran has a fleet of 57 buses.

CyRide of Ames, Iowa, offers services to students at a reduced fee.

Iowa State University Students pay 35 cents per ride for the service.

Tom Davenport of CyRide said the service was a joint venture between the City of Ames and ISU.

Davenport said the number of student riders was dropping, but that students account for more than 85 percent of all rides.

CyRide routes run citywide, and buses are scheduled from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. on weekdays.

A program that sets CyRide apart from many bus systems, Davenport said, is the Friday and Saturday Moonlight Express service.

Moonlight Express buses are free to students and run from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.

"The original intent was to prevent drinking and driving, but it has become larger than that," Davenport said.

He said many riders used the

Moonlight Express buses as a quick alternative to battling traffic and parking problems related to weekend plans.

This week's StarTran survey asks riders to grade StarTran on cleanliness, comfort, accuracy of schedule and driver courtesy.

Although the results will not be tabulated until sometime next week, UNL students seemed to be happy with StarTran services.

"It's a pretty good deal," Ty Sander, a sophomore diversified agriculture major, said. "You don't have to fight traffic or parking lots."

Sander, who lives on East Campus, said he had a car but depended on bus service for commuting to City Campus.

Audrey Jones, who also commutes from East Campus, had no complaints about the service.

"It gets me where I need to go," the sophomore psychology major said.

Sovereign said StarTran's highest marks last year were for driver courtesy.

The main area of complaint in past years has been commuter shelters at bus stops, Sovereign said.

Maintenance of shelters has rated lowest for years," she said.

Maintenance was hard to keep up on, Sovereign said, because of weather-related damage.

"It's a total distraction," Lombardi said.

If a black market does not take potential tax revenue from the state, Nebraskans may buy their cigarettes out of state, Peters said. But don't expect mad dashes for Wyoming, where the cigarette tax is 12 cents a pack.

"I think people aren't necessarily driving just to buy cigarettes, but if you are on business, you're going to buy the cheaper gas when you're there," Peters said.

"And if you're inclined to smoke, you're probably going to buy your favorite brand, if you can save a couple dollars."

An estimated \$75 million could be generated from the tax the first year. The bill would also create the Tobacco Prevention, Control and Enforcement Fund to conduct anti-smoking programs.

Both lobbyists said they were encouraged by the delay of the vote. Peters said any delay was good, because it meant senators were not debating the bill for passage.

Lombardi said the fact that senators were still considering double-digit cigarette tax increases gave him hope.

"Now we're talking in terms of 20 (cents) and 30 (cents) and 60 (cents), because I think people are recognizing the fact that this is an effective way to reduce teen smoking."

Senators table cigarette tax debate until May

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Lombardi said Monday's vote to delay was a strategic move. Mid-May is a key time for the Legislature, because that's when lawmakers make many tax and spending decisions.

Lombardi is supporting the bill because he believes an increase in the cost for a pack of smokes reduces the number of smokers.

Lombardi said a 10 percent increase in price, about 30 cents, would result in a 7 to 15 percent reduction in teen smoking and a 4 percent reduction in adult smoking.

"It's the No. 1 health problem facing all Nebraskans," Lombardi said.

But tobacco lobbyists have said the bill could cost Nebraska valuable tax revenue or create a black market for cigarettes in the state.

Bill Peters, a lobbyist with Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company and Lorillard, said Nebraska has the second-highest cigarette tax among its neighbors, making a black market a possibility.

"It has occurred a number of other places where there's a strong disparity," Peters said referring to states such as Michigan.

Lombardi doesn't believe that a black market in cigarettes would appear in Nebraska if the tax increases. He saw that threat as a scare tactic used on the public.

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