

Breaking News »

RTA will halt minibus service in Lakeview, Gentilly

By Frank Donze, The Times-Picayune

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The user-friendly minibus service that the Regional Transit Authority launched in heavily damaged sections of town last year is scheduled to be discontinued in Lakeview and Gentilly next month, with larger buses set to roll more frequently through the still-recovering neighborhoods,

Meanwhile, RTA officials said the so-called Lil' Easy program will live on for now in the still-sparsely populated Lower 9th Ward, where customers book rides by phone on 14-seat vans that crisscross the area, stopping within a few blocks of every residence.

A recommendation to shelve the initiative in Lakeview and Gentilly is expected to win approval from the RTA board at its monthly meeting Thursday.

Never meant to be permanent

RTA General Manager Justin Augustine said this week that the Lil' Easy service was never meant to be a permanent feature. The program's main objective, he said, was to ensure every section of New Orleans received some level of transit service.

Lil Easy customers book rides by phone on 14-seat vans that crisscross the area, stopping within a few blocks of every residence.

A year after the program debuted in Lakeview and Gentilly, Augustine said the agency has a better understanding of the service levels needed there, and schedulers are prepared to make adjustments.

"Although the Lil' Easy is being removed, we will be replacing it with standard, fixed-route lines," he said. "Residents of those areas won't be losing services. Technically, they will be gaining them."

Expanded routes

For example, the Hayne Boulevard line that serves Lakeview will get a second bus and its route will extend, traveling from the University of New Orleans to Delgado Community College. The line will operate weekdays only from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.

In addition, the Lake Vista loop, which now runs on weekdays, will operate seven days a week. Service, which now ends at 6 p.m., will be extended two hours.

In Gentilly, the St. Bernard Avenue line that now ends at Senate Street will travel to the UNO campus, offering service to communities near the new Holy Cross School and Greater Gentilly High School. The line, which operates only on weekdays now, will run daily, and service, which now ends at 8 p.m., will extend to 9 p.m.

Augustine said the changes, scheduled to take effect late next month, also will fill a need for residents moving into about 400 new apartments on the site of the former St. Bernard housing development, now called Columbia Parc at the Bayou District.

"Our plan all along was, as the city's demographics change, to adjust our service plan to change with them," he said.

Rebuilt from ground up

The RTA was forced to rebuild the transit system from the ground up after Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters destroyed the bulk of its bus fleet. While annual ridership has climbed steadily in the five years since the storm, the current numbers are still only about one-third of the pre-Katrina total of 35 million.

To cover the losses, the agency has slashed payroll and services, and has looked to innovative methods.

In 2009, the RTA bought 10 DaimlerChrysler vans at a cost of \$81,000 each to run the Lil' Easy program,

which debuted in the Lower 9th Ward in January 2009 and five months later in Gentilly and Lakeview.

Like the vast majority of public transit lines in American cities, officials said the service was not designed to make money. Through April, records show that the three Lil' Easy lines are the RTA's lowest-performing: The average monthly ridership is 1,200 in Lakeview, 840 in Gentilly and 790 in the Lower 9th Ward.

In contrast, the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line, the RTA's busiest route, carries more than 10,000 passengers a day, or 300,000 a month.

Cost-effective service

Veolia Transportation, the French industry giant that took over management of the RTA in October 2008, implemented the minibus program, which it uses in several communities on the outskirts of Paris and in Fairfax, Va.

While it loses money, company officials say the service has proven to be a more cost-effective way to serve customers in low-density communities. In such places, it makes more sense to use small, efficient vehicles rather than large, gas-guzzling buses.

While Lakeview and Gentilly have experienced steady but slow population growth in the five years since Hurricane Katrina, the working-class Lower 9th Ward continues to struggle.

Before the flood, the area below the Industrial Canal was home to about 14,000 households, many of them dependent on public transit. The house count has dwindled to less than 2,000, according to estimates, a total that RTA officials say makes it cost-prohibitive to run bus service at pre-storm levels.

Computer program plots bus routes

For the standard \$1.25 fare, the Lil' Easy program allows customers to reserve a seat on a van, which can accommodate two wheelchairs and uses cleaner-burning biodiesel fuel, up to a week out or as little as an hour in advance. With address information in hand, dispatchers tell customers where the closest stop is located and then provide them with a 10-minute pickup window.

As customers book rides, a computer program plots a route for pickups. Dispatchers use radios to help drivers adjust routes to account for reservations that come in after a van hits the road.

RTA officials say they are exploring plans for the minibuses that will no longer roll in Lakeview and Gentilly,

In the future, Augustine said the vans could replace near-empty, 40- and 35-foot buses now on late-night, downtown routes. In many cases, he said, buses carry only a handful of hotel and service industry workers who arrive or leave after dark.

In addition, the RTA may look into using the vans to move customers through the cramped streets of the French Quarter, where large buses are banned.

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