

Bus ridership recovers from dip

Written by

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Gambling and shopping pay off for the county's bus system, which carried a record number of passengers last year — more than 32 million — in part because of the swarms of people heading for two destinations in Yonkers.

Crowds of bettors now ride the Bee-Line system's Route 20 and 21 buses along Central Park Avenue to get to Empire Casino at Yonkers Raceway, county transportation officials said.

The buses, fortunately, don't face the same safety and driver-fatigue issues as gambling buses like the one that crashed March 13 on the Westchester County-Bronx border, killing 15 people.

"We're a local transit bus, so we don't go out overnight or over the highways. We don't have the same circumstances as the charter buses or tour buses," said Neil Erickson of Liberty Lines, which operates Bee-Line.

The continuing expansion and renovation of the Cross County Shopping Center has contributed to the growth in business for the buses, which came as mass transit

nationwide dipped slightly, at least for the first three quarters of 2010.

Underlying the upward trend in Bee-Line ridership was the decision to begin accepting MetroCards in April 2007, allowing riders to transfer to Bee-Line buses from New York City subways and buses at no extra charge.

"You can't live without the bus if you don't have a car," Yonkers resident Lillian Bentley said last week, catching the 20 bus at the Cross County Shopping Center to get to her job in White Plains.

The remodeling at the shopping center has brought so much more businesses to the bus system that service has been doubled, bringing a 20 bus every 10 minutes instead of every 20 minutes, said Richard Stiller, director of surface transportation for the Westchester County Department of Public Works and Transportation.

"If you go down there on a nice evening from 4 o'clock to about 8 o'clock, it's just

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bus after bus, and we just load them up," Stiller said.

Last year, the buses carried 32,273,641 passengers, up about 2,000 from 2008. In 2009, ridership dropped to just under 32 million. In the Central Avenue corridor from White Plains to the Bronx, the busiest in the system, the 20 and 21 buses carried more than 4.5 million riders last year.

Theodora Titus of South Carolina took the bus to Empire City with her daughter, Charlene Myers of the Bronx, whom she was visiting.

"It was really close from where we are in the Bronx," said Titus, 65.

Myers, 47, said she enjoyed the ride.

"It was pretty quick and it was comfortable," she said.

Another help to ridership numbers is the connection with the subway system at the West 242nd Street station, where passengers can transfer from the Bee-Line 2 or 3 bus to the subway 1 train or back, Stiller said.

But the bus system, operated by Liberty Lines, wasn't the only mass transit system seeing growth. Metro-North Railroad recovered from a drop in 2009 to reach its second busiest year, carrying 81.7 million passengers. That was second only to 2008, when the railroad gave almost 84 million rides.

On mass transit systems nationwide, ridership dipped in the first quarter, rose slightly in the second, and dipped again in the third, said Virginia Miller, spokeswoman for the American Public Transportation Association. For the first nine months, ridership was down about 1 percent, according to APTA's numbers. Numbers for 2010's last quarter have not been compiled.

Lower gas prices and then high unemployment took their tolls on the transit systems, where almost 60 percent of riders, in general, are commuters, Miller said. What's more, many systems lost money as Americans spent money more cautiously, because many regional transit systems receive a portion of sales tax on goods and mortgage taxes.

Stiller said ridership on the Bee-Line system early this year did not likely show the same growth because of the string of harsh snowstorms that socked the region, impairing service. Metro-North spokeswoman Marjorie Anders said the

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railroad eked out a slight gain — two-tenths of a percent — over the previous January, despite drastic drops in ridership on the worst storm days.

"It would have been a lot better without all those storms," she said.

Through it all, Amtrak ridership nationwide has continued to grow.

February marked its 16th straight month in which ridership had climbed over the same month a year earlier. January and February both set records, with about 2.1 million riders in each month. The railroad's Northeast Regional service — the railroad's busiest, running from Washington to Boston — did see a drop of about 1 percent in January from a year earlier, carrying about 500,000 passengers. But the Acela Express, carrying almost half as many passengers along the same route, more than made up for that dip with a 7.4 percent increase.

Railroad spokesman Clifford Cole said the railroad does not rely as heavily on commuters as regional systems such as Metro-North. What's more, bad weather can often drive customers to Amtrak rather than chasing them away.

"When there's bad weather and the airlines are shut down and the roads are impassable, a lot of the times we can still get people to their destination," Cole said.

By the numbers

Ridership on Westchester County's Bee-Line bus

system:
 2010 32,273,641
 2009 31,953,355
 2008 32,271,574
 2007* 30,875,887
 2006 28,921,545
 Ridership on bus lines 20 and 21, along the Central Park Avenue corridor:
 2010 4,511,201
 2009 4,262,949
 2008 4,155,013
 2007* 3,901,571
 2006 3,159,419
 * Bee-Line buses begin accepting MetroCards used by New York City subways and buses in April 2007.
 Source: Westchester County Department of Public Works and Transportation

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