

So near, yet so far ... and so long

Some taking Metro endure labryinth of transfers that could turn 10-minute commute into 2 hours

By **LESLIE CASIMIR** Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

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Metro bus rider Pablo Camarillo's daily commute to work is so long that he often sees both sunrise and sunset — when he manages to stay awake.

To arrive on time, the auto parts warehouse worker sets off on an odyssey that starts at 5:40 a.m. with him boarding the 88 Hobby Airport bus at the corner of Sabo and Fuqua streets. He gets off on Broadway and Morley to transfer to the 73 Belfort Crosstown, which takes him to the Texas Medical Center. There, he gets on the 14 Hiram Clarke bus that takes him to his job on the southwest end of town. If things go well, all this happens by 8 a.m.

His evening commute starts at 6 p.m.

"I wish I had a car," said Camarillo, 30, who spends four hours of his day on a maze of Metro buses. "I have to get some sleep on the bus."

While some residents inside the Loop continue to hotly debate massive light rail projects that could potentially bring relief to tens of thousands of mass transit riders, there are others who live just

outside the Loop who spend hours commuting and have no relief in sight.

Their daily treks to work, to school, to church are precarious ones, filled with unexpected waits, long walks and a labyrinth of bus transfers.

Sundays are the worst, when the number 88 bus is suspended.

"A lot of people get stuck out here on Sundays," said Leonard Meacell, 63. "To go to church, I try to get a ride from somebody. Forget going to the grocery store."

But some people say they have stopped complaining. They gave up around the same time the 89 South Park Circulator was discontinued because of low ridership, transit officials explained. That was back in 2005. Now they rely on roughly four bus routes to connect them to the rest of the city: The numbers 52, 55, 73 and 88.

"Metro said there was low ridership, but many people out here now have to walk to get to where they need to go," said Mary Roberts, a civic club president who three years ago provided Metro officials with a community survey. But she said nothing came of it. "We just moved on and left it alone."

'It's a problem'

In recent years, the neighborhoods planted in the shadows of Hobby Airport have experienced considerable growth.

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The area has seen the construction of many new affordable housing. Since 1998, for example, 17 apartment complexes were built within a five-mile radius of the airport, said Bruce McClenny, president of Apartment Data Services, which monitors the apartment construction industry, among other things. Of that number, 14 were built under the state's Low Income Tax Credit Housing Program, which means the units are rented out based on household income and not market rate.

It is an area rich with new single-family homes, as well, said David Jarvis, Houston director of Metrostudy, a residential consulting firm. In 2007, 836 homes were constructed; in 2006, 1193; and 2005 saw 1154 new homes erected.

Margaret Jenkins, 72, who has to transfer four times before she gets to her part-time office job near the Reliant Park, believes the bus routes are mind-boggling for commuters who don't work downtown or at the medical center.

"It's a problem," said Jenkins, whose itinerary takes anywhere from one hour and 20 minutes to two hours one way. Each morning, she boards the 52 Scott bus on Rosehaven and Airport Blvd. She transfers for the 73 Crosstown on Scott and Belfort streets and then makes another transfer for the 18 Kirby bus heading northbound at the Fannin South Park & Ride center. Once she gets to Kirby Drive near the Loop 610, she jaywalks to take the southbound 18 Kirby which drives along the Southwest Loop.

That is where her office is located.

Mass transit challenges

When someone offers her a ride to work, the commute time drops considerably — to 10 minutes.

That's part of the challenge of using mass transit in Houston today, said Kari Hackett, transportation program manager of the Houston-Galveston Area Council.

"That kind of crosstown trip is difficult in Houston because the radial flow on the major roadways leads to downtown," Hackett said. "But more job opportunities are outside downtown."

Metro officials say they understand Jenkins and Camarillo's frustrations, but the street infrastructure has to be in place, said Jim Archer, manager of service evaluation. Roads don't go all the way through and many are incomplete, Archer said.

"When you look at Airport (Blvd.), Airport would be a nice logical route except the road doesn't go all the way through," he said. "The streets make it very difficult for us to operate buses. ... This is not because of Metro."

More crosstown bus opportunities are being planned for the Southeast region, but it all depends on when the city decides to build up the roads that go from the east part of the city to west.

Raequel Roberts, spokeswoman for Metro, said she doesn't know when that will be.

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In the meanwhile, Camarillo and Jenkins and the countless of others will just have to make do.

"I don't have any other choice," Camarillo said.

leslie.casimir@chron.com

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