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## 3 new Pace express bus routes slow to draw riders

December 27, 2009 7:31 PM | [No Comments](#)

The buses are a commuter's dream, offering comfortable upholstered seats, lots of leg room, individual reading lights and even toilets. What they don't have are passengers.

Several weeks after Pace started three new express bus routes and expanded another – at a cost of more than \$1.7 million a year to operate – ridership is barely getting out of first gear.

Each morning and evening, luxury coaches operated by a private contractor for Pace roll on expressways between [Bolingbrook](#) and [Schaumburg](#), Plainfield and downtown [Chicago](#), and [Harvey](#) and [Rosemont](#). Often, however, the buses run empty.

Pace acknowledges that ridership on the three routes has been meager so far: Only 21 daily riders were reported during the first two weeks on one route, while as few as two riders were recorded on another.

But Pace officials are optimistic that interest will grow as word gets out that they are an alternative to driving on congested expressways.

"We believe what we'll see is a gradual increase in ridership over time," spokesman Patrick Wilmot said. "It's unrealistic to say that on the first few days or weeks we'll have loads of people. Over time, it will develop."

Officials hope the new routes will serve as an innovative mass transit option while improving suburb-to-suburb connections. The goal is to provide access to jobs, schools and medical care while taking cars off the roads.

Transportation experts envision the routes as precursors for a [Chicago](#) version of Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT. Some day, express buses will haul commuters on upgraded expressway shoulders as swiftly as rail transit, only at a much lower cost, officials say.

"The good thing about such BRT service is you can implement it in an evolutionary, gradual type of way," said Tom Murtha, a transportation planner with the [Chicago](#) Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which worked with Pace to develop the routes.

The new Pace routes may be the victims of poor timing. Ridership on all public transportation declined over the last year as unemployment hit record levels, according to the Regional Transportation Authority.

It's also an awkward time for the budget-challenged suburban bus agency. As part of an effort to fill a \$6.5 million budget shortfall, Pace recently eliminated or trimmed service on 24 routes, many because of low ridership.

Pace isn't paying for the new routes out of its own budget. The money is coming from an RTA innovation fund and a federal grant aimed at fostering access to jobs.

One new route, No. 755, operating on the Stevenson Expressway (Interstate 55), is intended to connect residents of fast-growing Plainfield, [Bolingbrook](#) and other southwest suburbs with jobs at the University of Illinois at [Chicago](#) campus and the nearby medical district.

So far, this route has performed the best, attracting about 21 riders a day, Pace says.

Trudi Moehring recently took the express bus from [Bolingbrook](#) to get to her teaching job in [Chicago's](#) [Bridgeport](#) neighborhood. "I really like it ... and I'll keep using it," Moehring said.

Floyd Conway, of [Bolingbrook](#), says he used to take Metra to work downtown, but he prefers Pace.

After taking the new route for the first time, Conway said: "It worked for me."

Another route, No. 655, runs on the Veterans Memorial Tollway (Interstate 355) and Interstate 290 connecting [Bolingbrook](#) and [Schaumburg](#), with stops in Downers Grove, [Addison](#) and Itasca. The route provides a direct, north-south link between the western suburbs.

Similarly, buses on Route 889 travel the Tri-State Tollway (Interstate 294) from [Harvey](#) and [Blue Island](#) to the CTA's Blue Line in [Rosemont](#). This route is designed to draw workers from the south suburbs to jobs in the northwest suburbs.

Daily ridership on these routes has been in the single digits so far however.

To save fuel and cut operating costs while the market develops, Pace is truncating trips that aren't carrying passengers. For example, if a northbound Route 889 bus does not have any passengers by the time it gets to I-294, it returns to [Harvey](#) rather than complete the trip empty.

Pace also extended service on a fourth route, No. 855, between downtown [Chicago](#) and Plainfield. Also known as the I-55 Flyer, it has served [Bolingbrook](#) and other communities for more than 20 years.

Ridership on this route has been strong, carrying about 320 daily riders, Pace says.



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"That route has a very dedicated ridership core and does very well," Wilmot said. "Given the way the population has expanded in the (southwest suburbs), we are confident there's a market in Plainfield as well."

Pace's goal is to have 200 to 300 riders a day by next year on the new routes. The agency says it's willing to be patient and give the routes time to succeed.

To attract passengers, Pace is using several marketing techniques, including route videos posted on YouTube. Local communities and businesses also are promoting the routes, Wilmot said.

"While we'd always like to see higher ridership from the onset, past experience with new service dictates that it takes time for the market to develop and for ridership to grow," Wilmot said.

Joseph Schwieterman, an authority at DePaul University on the economics of urban transportation, agreed. He noted that because of suburbanites' reliance on automobiles, it will take quite a while for express buses to prove their value.

"It's going to take years to build a viable customer base," Schwieterman said. "Pace may not have that luxury."

*Nancy Gier contributed to this report.*

*—Richard Wronski*

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John on [December 27, 2009 7:58 PM](#)

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