

Bus route to Waco could boost Marlin

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There is now a solution for commuters along the State Highway 6 corridor between Waco and Marlin trying to figure out how to make the trip without a vehicle of their own: Catch the bus.

Since Nov. 12, the Waco Transit System has run buses six times a day Monday through Saturday between Waco and Marlin as part of a new collaboration with the Heart of Texas Workforce Development Board. Today is the last day to take a trip for free before riders will have to pay \$5 for a day pass or \$70 for a month's worth of travel.

It's the first fixed-route public transportation service in the Heart of Texas region that connects cities in more than one county. But the program is also significant because of the needs that service planners hope to address: providing access to employment and education opportunities in the Waco area.

The need is especially great in Falls County, which is considered one of the poorest in the state. About 45 percent of working-age residents in Falls County commute to a job in another county, and about 1,500 Marlin residents travel to work in Waco each day, according to census figures.

Unemployment problems are difficult to overcome in Falls County, which includes some areas where 20 percent of the households do not own a vehicle.

Julie Talbert, who oversees transportation planning for the Heart of Texas Workforce Development Board and spearheaded the organization of the program, said she hopes the new service can help serve as an economic catalyst for Falls County.

It is possible for the service to bring in more than \$1 million in economic impact to Falls County within the first year of service, Talbert said.

"It will just grow from there as more employees are taking advantage of it and as more high-skill people are coming out of school and are able to enter employment at a higher wage," she said.

The bus route includes three stops in Marlin and one at Riesel city hall. Once commuters reach Waco's central transit station, they can transfer to any of the city's bus routes, including stops at McLennan Community College and Texas State Technical College.

Lisa Wilhelmi, MCC's community relations director, said the program will help establish a missing link between Waco and Marlin for students who want to seek higher education.

"My hopes are that anyone who wants a two-year or four-year degree can get it," she said.

Alexis Newmann, TSTC's executive director for institutional advancement, said the new service is a key part of the college's outreach efforts in Falls County.

"Anything we can do to help get the students up here is a good thing," she said. "We want to grow that area so it will have more population and get more students to come (to college) here."

The service will also connect Falls County and eastern McLennan County residents with employers located near Waco bus stops. The most recent addition to the list of stops is a twice-daily route to the Sanderson Farms poultry processing plant outside of Bellmead on U.S. Highway 84. The plant eventually will employ about 1,400 workers.

Marlin Mayor Norman Erskine said the added job opportunities for commuters will help relieve the city's ongoing financial woes by bringing income with them from the Waco area.

"I think this is one of the best ways of getting people employed because they want to work," he said. "They just have no mode of transportation to get there."

So far, ridership has been low. The service has grown to have about eight to 10 riders a day. However, program organizers hope that it gradually increases until the program is self-sufficient. The start-up period is being partially financed by a three-year federal grant.

Some of the challenges to increasing ridership will be raising awareness of the service and changing people's mind-sets about using public transportation, Talbert said.

"So many of the potential riders don't come to Waco and so they don't know how to read the bus schedule or where they might go if they came here," she said. "There are layers and layers of education."

But prospective riders unfamiliar with Waco's transit system shouldn't worry about getting lost, Talbert said. Waco Transit employees are in place to direct first-time commuters to where they need to go, she said.

Although access to work and education is the focus of the program, prospective riders shouldn't think those are the only reasons they can ride the new bus route, Talbert said.

"Do you want to go the (Cameron Park Zoo)? Get on the bus," she said.

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