

Late-night Waco Transit route to carry Sanderson workers home

By Mike Copeland Tribune-Herald business editor
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Adrienne Joiner, 20, works the second shift at the Sanderson Farms poultry-processing plant.

She arrives at work at 4 in the afternoon and does not complete her chicken deboning duties until 1:30 the next morning.



Ricky Dawson departs a Waco Transit bus Friday afternoon as he prepares to begin a shift at Sanderson Farms.
Duane A. Laverty/Tribune-Herald

Joiner, who is eight months pregnant, owns no car. She hitches a ride home with a friend.

“But she hasn’t been coming to work, so I have to get rides with others. I’ve had to worry a lot of times about that,” said Joiner, who has been working at the chicken plant for about a year.

As of Tuesday, she can set her mind at ease.

A pilot program involving Sanderson Farms and Waco Transit means that a van will welcome Joiner and others like her as they leave work in the dead of night. It will drop her off near her doorstep in South Waco.

“I consider it a blessing,” said Joiner, who thanks Sanderson Farms for what it’s doing for employees.

Company spokeswoman Jackie Allen said a lot of employees use public transit to get to work, but vans and buses didn’t run at midnight so workers had to scramble for alternatives.

Some called taxis they couldn’t afford, or even walked home. That had to stop because many of those with transportation problems eventually quit work at Sanderson Farms, Allen said.

Working with the city

The company lobbied Waco Transit to add a late-night run primarily to serve North Waco and South Waco, areas of town that a high percentage of its employees call home.

“This program provides a reliable and affordable way home, and we believe the reduction in turnover will be significant,” said Julie Talbert of the Heart of Texas Workforce.

Heart of Texas Workforce secured grants under the federal Job Access and Reverse Commute program to help fuel the effort.

When local matching money is included, \$1.06 million is available.

But that money does more than help late-night workers get home.

It continues the “6 to Success” program in which Waco Transit picks up people from communities like Marlin, Chilton and Riesel in the Highway 6 corridor and hauls them back to Waco via Highway 77, where Sanderson Farms is located.

Employees work morning shifts at the poultry plant and take the bus home in the afternoon.

These services are not free to employees. Those living outside Waco pay \$70 for a monthly bus pass, while those who take part in the new late-night service will pay \$40 for a monthly pass.

Customers can use the passes to ride Waco Transit buses at any time to go anywhere the buses run.

“Ten dollars a week to get to and from work is probably cheaper than driving a car,” Allen said.

Finding a ride



Sanderson Farms employees relax in a Waco Transit bus Thursday afternoon. The bus service will begin giving late-night workers a lift on Tuesday.
Duane A. Laverty/Waco Tribune-Herald

Many Sanderson Farms employees, including 24-year-old Ricky Dawson of Waco, already have passes. Like Joiner, Dawson usually gets off at 1:30 a.m. and catches a ride home with a friend.

“But we’re not always on the same shift, so sometimes she’s waiting on me or I’m waiting on her,” Dawson said. “There have been times I’ve had to call my sister or someone else. Having a van will be more reliable.”

About 400 people work during the second shift, which ends around 2 a.m.

Joiner said she will go back to work at Sanderson Farms after her maternity leave.

She’s not saving for a car just yet, saying all her money is being tucked away for her baby.

Growing popularity

Sanderson Farms’ Allen said 30 people have signed up to regularly ride the late-night vans. Others have said they might like to use them occasionally, and they would be billed a daily rate, she said.

“I expect that to grow to 70, 80 or even 90 after three months when they see how convenient the service is,” said Allen.

Employees will be dropped off as near to their homes as possible, said John Hendrickson, general manager of Waco Transit, calling it curb-to-curb service.

He said he encourages other companies with late-night shifts to get involved.

If demand and ridership increases, Waco Transit can allocate more vehicles.

Gary Rhodes, a spokesman for the Pilgrim’s Pride poultry plant in Waco, said it has lost out on job applicants who were told during the interview process that public transit shuts off at 7 p.m.

“We would welcome anything we can do as an employer to attract and retain the best applicants,” he said.

Hendrickson said grants will help keep the program afloat.

The “6 to Success” website lists 13 local donors, including the city of Waco, Sanderson Farms, Texas State Technical College and McLennan Community College.