The Hoover Hop Shuttle: A Mid-Day Shuttle Service from “Office Walls to Shopping Malls”

Summary

The concept of the Hoover Hop Shuttle as a neighborhood circulator was identified in the Transit Development Program prepared for the Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority in July 2000. The purpose of the HOP circulator is to allow people to travel during lunch time to popular destinations for lunch and shopping without using their cars. From office walls to shopping malls, the Hoover Hop is free and open to the public. Currently, the Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority operates two shuttle routes from BellSouth, which is the corporate sponsor on Data Drive to the Wal-Mart Super Shopping Center on Highway 150, and Riverchase Galleria, the largest shopping and entertainment complex in the state of Alabama. The Hoover Hop project is a successful public-private partnership funded through the Birmingham Metropolitan Planning Organization by matching local dollars with federal funds under the Congestion Mitigation Air Quality Program (CMAQ).

Description

The Hoover Hop is a first of its kind public-private partnership in the Birmingham Metropolitan region in Alabama, bringing transit service to a previously unserved suburban regional business and retail area. The HOP is a mid-day local shuttle service that provides transportation from local businesses to popular shopping areas. The HOP is a free service and operates since August 19, 2002 between the hours of 11:00 am and 2:30 pm, Monday through Friday on a 10-minute headway (Figure 1). Currently, the Metro Area Express (MAX) bus service provider operates two shuttle routes from BellSouth, which is the corporate sponsor on Data Drive to the Wal-Mart super shopping center on Highway 150, and Riverchase Galleria, the largest shopping and entertainment complex in the state of Alabama. The HOP buses are wheelchair accessible.

The project was initiated by the City of Hoover, a community of 64,000 residents, just south of the City of Birmingham, Alabama. Hoover has seen phenomenal growth since its recent beginnings including the addition of many medical and recreational facilities, hotels, banks, and offices of large corporations such as BellSouth and Health South. Despite the growth in population, businesses, and services no public transit service existed in the city, prior to this effort. The City of Hoover envisioned the Hoover Hop as a way to introduce public transportation as a viable option to the ever-growing traffic congestion and regional air quality problems.

The Hop shuttle service was realized as a partnership between the City of Hoover, BellSouth, Riverchase Galleria Shopping Mall, and the Birmingham-Jefferson Transit Authority. The project is currently funded through the Birmingham Metropolitan Planning Organization by matching local dollars with federal funds under the Congestion Mitigation Air Quality Program (CMAQ). More specifically, the City of Hoover provides 20 percent local match for the service while 80 percent of capital and operational costs are covered through CMAQ funding.
Leaving BellSouth

**am:** 11:00, 11:15, 11:30, 11:45  
**pm:** 12:00, 12:15, 12:30, 12:45, 1:00, 1:15, 1:30, 1:45, 2:00

Galleria Restaurants

**am:** 11:06, 11:21, 11:36, 11:51  
**pm:** 12:06, 12:21, 12:36, 12:51, 1:06, 1:21, 1:36, 1:51, 2:06

Sam's Club Plaza

**am:** 11:17, 11:32, 11:47  
**pm:** 12:02, 12:17, 12:32, 12:47, 1:02, 1:17, 1:32, 1:47, 2:02, 2:17

Galleria

**am:** 11:10, 11:25, 11:40, 11:55  
**pm:** 12:10, 12:25, 12:40, 12:55, 1:10, 1:25, 1:40, 1:55, 2:10

Return to BellSouth

**am:** 11:27, 11:42, 11:57  
**pm:** 12:12, 12:27, 12:42, 12:57, 1:12, 1:27, 1:42, 1:57, 2:12, 2:27

**Figure 1. Hoover Hop Route and Schedule**

**User Assessment**

**Customers**

Since its introduction there was a great response from the users for the Hop and the service was welcomed. This is evident from customer surveys that are conducted periodically to obtain feedback about the service and customer satisfaction. The overwhelming majority of the users are satisfied with the service and offer suggestions for possible service expansion. As an example, some anecdotal comments from a survey of 177 users conducted at the first week of shuttle service follow.
Great service, friendly drivers.
Add Sam’s Club and more stops around the Galleria.
Extend the route to the new Walmart and Highway 150.
Hopefully other business will join and you can expand and have more routes.
Stop closer to more food places.

Agency

Several agencies participated in the planning and implementation of the Hoover Shuttle. Their titles and responsibilities are listed below:

- City of Hoover. The City of Hoover was the original applicant for the CMAQ grant money, and has been the main actor advocating the inception of the shuttle. The City of Hoover continues to have the primary responsibility for implementing and monitoring the shuttle.

- Birmingham Regional Planning Commission. The Birmingham RPC has provided technical assistance to the City of Hoover during the planning phase, and continues its involvement through an oversight committee.

- Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority. The BJCTA is responsible for operating the shuttle through its contractor, First Transit.

- BellSouth. BellSouth is the first employer served by the shuttle. BellSouth contributed towards the shuttle’s operating costs, and assisted in marketing efforts.

- ICF Consulting. ICF Consulting was hired by the Birmingham RPC to develop this business plan, including cost estimates and marketing, and provide implementation assistance for the shuttle launch.

Operations planning began with a Web-based survey of BellSouth employees performed during a two-week period from November to December, 2001. Employees of BellSouth, EDS, and Accenture (the three primary tenants of the BellSouth facility) were surveyed. Of the estimated 1,800 employees surveyed, responses were received from 538 employees, for a response rate of almost 30 percent. The survey asked a number of questions about commute patterns, schedule, lunchtime travel, and willingness to use a shuttle service and provided useful feedback regarding expected ridership and hours of operation.

Overall, the Hoover Hop has been a successful undertaking. In the first three weeks of operation, the shuttle ridership increased 52 percent, and meeting overall ridership expectations. The majority of trips (over 60%) originated from BellSouth. The company is one of the major industrial partners and handled the internal communication of this new service.

As was expected ridership stabilized following the first 2 months of operation (Figure 2). In the summer of 2003, the shuttle routes were revised as an attempt to increase the ridership and add business partners in the office park and retail area. The response of the customers was very positive and led in an increase in ridership in August 2003 to its highest value ever.

The success of this service may be partially attributed to a solid marketing plan that was developed and implemented on the basis of four objectives as follows:
Technology Assessment

Benefits

As an innovative form of public transportation the Hoover Hop provides many benefits to the citizens and the community including reduced traffic congestion during the lunch peak hour, cleaner air, savings in energy consumption, and less wear-and-tear on roads and vehicles. Moreover, the Hoover Hop adds user convenience as shuttle guests are able to enjoy a 10 to 15 minute ride to their destination without the hassle of fighting traffic or searching for parking.

An added benefit of the program is that it has functioned as a new way to introduce commuters to the Commute Smart Rideshare program, since employees no longer need their car for mid-day errands. Also, the Hop supports the local economy by providing an easy way for customers to patronize area businesses and restaurants at lunchtime. Finally, all HOP buses are wheelchair accessible promoting mobility and accessibility principles for all transportation users.

Observability

The response was receptive towards people using the system, but several changes were made to try to adequately meet the customer’s needs. Initially one route looped to the BellSouth Data

Figure 2. Hoover Hop Ridership Data (September 2002-August 2003)

1. Develop a strong, recognizable brand identity for the shuttle service
2. Secure long-term investment from businesses to support the service
3. Encourage more employers to participate in the service
4. Generate media attention, particularly for launch of the service.

For each objective, there are listed supporting strategies, tactics to support the strategies, and issues that needed to be resolved between the various service partners.
center to Shops at Riverchase Galleria. The partners got together and added another route to
serve the new Colonial Shops on Hwy 150 (Wal-Mart) as well as a stop at the Sam’s Plaza. In
attempt to boost ridership, the single route between BellSouth and the Galleria was reinstated in
July 2003 with only an 8-minute headway.

Partners continue to monitor the performance and needs of customers in improving the Hoover
Hop service and developing transportation alternatives for the local residents.

Cost
The city of Hoover was able to take advantage of the Congestion, Mitigation Air Quality Program
for funding the Hoover Hop initiative. More specifically, the City of Hoover provides 20 percent
local match for the service while 80 percent of capital and operational costs are covered through
CMAQ funding and this makes the service free for users. The approximate operating cost for
the service is $200,000 per year and the vehicle cost is $60,000.

Future Plans
The contract for the service will expire in three years from implementation. There are plans for
continuing the service since the service is free and have concerns for healthy environment.
Negotiation with new partners and the current partners are going on.

References
This report is a compilation of materials from the following sources:


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