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Bill Berlow: It's time to be riding the bus again

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On Wednesday I saw the photo above of a bus full of riders and I was pleasantly startled. This past winter I rode that route, the StarMetro 80X Express, twice a week regularly and it wasn't at all unusual for me to be one of just two or three riders.

The 80X started running north of I-10 in December, and if someone had told me then that the bus would be almost full in the foreseeable future, I'd have been skeptical.

One day a fellow participant in last year's three-month PARC (Park-and-Ride Community) project had asked, "What do you think it will take for more people to ride the bus?"

My answer required only enough thinking time for my lips to form five words: "Five-dollar-a-gallon gasoline."

We're not there yet, thankfully, but \$4 a gallon doesn't look far off. And when you live almost 15 miles from your workplace, as I do, managing your commuting costs begins to look more financially attractive — and it's more environmentally responsible regardless of the cost.

A fellow rider, who like me also hadn't ridden for the past two months, rode three times last week. "The buses were nearly full," he said in an e-mail. "Cool, eh?"

Very cool.

My excuse for being a transit slacker lately is having to attend a lot more meetings during and after work away from the office. But on several days I could have ridden and just didn't; bad habits die hard and new routines are easily forgotten. Ever try dieting?

Obviously, taking the bus requires more planning and time. You have to be aware of a schedule other than the one you control, and you have to build in more time for getting to your destination, especially if you have to transfer from one bus to another.

If saving time is your highest priority and you don't care about financial or environmental impacts related to driving, you'll probably never become a StarMetro customer.

We Americans, rich, poor and everyone in between, are in love with our cars because they give us the sense of freedom and control. Deciding to even occasionally give that up is, in part, an acknowledgment that financial and other costs associated with such convenience have grown too high.

Before the extension, 80X ran only from the C.K. Steele Plaza downtown to the SouthWood Town Center. It connected three major employment centers: the Capital Circle Office Complex, the Koger Center and downtown. But potential riders in the North Thomasville Road area, who worked in any of those places or would transfer to another bus downtown, were left out. So the 80X northern extension was born.

Back when I was riding regularly, the 80X extension was still a pilot program after PARC had ended in early December. The "official" launch of the northern extension came last month at its northernmost stop, the Target in Bradfordville — with a news conference and unexpected mishap involving a parked bus that rolled. I was told it resulted in a few red faces but no major damage.

According to StarMetro, ridership has grown steadily. In March, a month before the official launch, the entire 80X route averaged 1,267 riders per five-day week. In April, it averaged 1,530 riders, an increase of more than 20 percent.

Marketing may be part of the reason, but sharp increases in the cost of gas are driving the numbers up more than anything. According to the Energy Information Administration, the average price of gas nationally went from \$3.16 a gallon in early March, to \$3.60 by the end of April, to \$3.72 in mid-May. Gas prices may come down a little, but the cheap gas of yesteryear is nothing more than a memory.

StarMetro apparently agrees. It's adjusted its 80X route to accommodate more riders. It's now running a 30-passenger shuttle on the 6:40 a.m. route instead of the previous 23-passenger shuttle.

We're part of a national trend.

"Mass transit systems around the country are seeing standing-room-only crowds on bus lines where seats were once easy to come by," *The New York Times* reported Saturday.

The *Times* quoted William W. Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association: "In almost every transit system I've talked to, we're seeing very high rates of growth the last few months. It's very clear that a significant portion of the increase in transit use is directly caused by people who are looking for alternatives to paying \$3.50 a gallon for gas."

Cars are still king in the U.S.A., but local, state and federal governments have at least begun to realize that the old strategy of spending tax dollars to make it as easy as possible for lone drivers to get in their cars and go is unsustainably bad policy.

Expensive, too. I'll soon be a semi-regular rider, guaranteed.