

Valley's RAPID transit a hit

Bus passengers celebrate year of gas savings

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Whether they're saving money on gas or reducing commuter stress, thousands of commuters have embraced Valley Metro's RAPID bus service since it began last year. Using specially built buses with padded, high-back seats; individual air controls; and luggage racks, four Phoenix bus routes take passengers on non-stop, rush-hour freeway rides from the edges of the city to downtown on weekdays.

RAPID celebrates its first anniversary today with a growing ridership and generally positive results from a recent Valley Metro survey of riders.

"I save \$75 a month on gas and I save myself the stress of dangerous driving habits from other drivers," wrote RAPID rider John Walradt of northeast Phoenix in his survey response.

Opening day was inauspicious, with the first run from the Park and Ride at Bell Road and Arizona 51 carrying just two riders.

A couple of hundred people tried RAPID during the course of the day.

Now, RAPID counts more than 2,600 passenger boardings.

"We didn't think we would have so many people so soon," said Marie Chappell, spokeswoman for Valley Metro, which operates the bus service in conjunction with Phoenix Public Transit.

RAPID was instituted as part of the Phoenix Transit Plan, passed by voters in March 2000.

Fifty-six distinctive-looking buses built for freeway travel were purchased through the funding, and eight Park and Ride lots were built.

The service started with two routes, a northeast Phoenix line that uses Arizona 51 and an Ahwatukee route that runs up Interstate 10.

Two more routes have been added, a north Phoenix route that operates on Interstate 17 and a west Phoenix route on I-10.

Each route includes about a dozen closely spaced bus trips designed to get people to work on time in the morning and take them home at night.

Valley Metro hopes to expand the service to other areas.

Many riders consider RAPID to be the executive bus line, compared with the regular public-transit buses that ply city streets.

"It's a lot faster, a lot more comfortable and has a lot higher clientele," said Kevin Gray of north Phoenix, who has been riding RAPID since November. "There are a lot of professional people on the bus."

Gray, who gets a ride from his wife to the Bell Road and Arizona 51 stop, said the trip takes about a half-hour to arrive at the Central Avenue and Van Buren Street terminal.

That bus makes a subsequent stop at the Arizona Capitol.

As part of RAPID's first anniversary, Valley Metro has produced four publications, one for each route, that will be handed out to riders today. . Each flier, which looks like a

tabloid newspaper, includes stories about drivers and riders, survey results and route information.

One of the vignettes in the Ahwatukee route publication tells how Burt Jorgensen, chief of the Maricopa County Attorney's Trial Bureau, uses RAPID not only to save on gas but to save on the cost of an automobile.

His 16-year-old daughter drives him to the Park and Ride at 40th Street and Pecos Road in the morning and gets to keep the car.

"She is able to have the car during the day, and I didn't have to buy her one," Jorgensen said.