

Capitol bus service to end next week

Luxury Harrisburg line averaged only five riders per trip

Friday, July 10, 2009

By Brian O'Neill, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Steel City Flyer, the luxury bus that runs twice daily from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg, will make its last ride next Thursday.

"We misread the market," said Henry Posner III, the railway man who launched the service last November.

Workers don't do math the same way as their employers, he explained. Someone sent to work in Harrisburg could be reimbursed by their employers for up to 55 cents a mile for driving their own cars. They perceived they'd be giving up money (more than \$200 for a round-trip), though they'd save their employers money by riding the bus at \$138. That was a subtlety he hadn't considered when the Flyer began its runs, Mr. Posner said.

The bus also couldn't get access to Amtrak's intermodal terminal in Harrisburg, where passengers might connect easily with fast trains headed east to Philadelphia, which leave hourly. The terminal had been subleased to another bus company, Capitol Trailways, so the Flyer had to drop off passengers 200 feet from the front door.

There were four other Harrisburg stops but the Daimler/Mercedes Benz bus, which offered padded, adjustable seats and continuous Wi-Fi service, averaged only about five passengers per trip.

"It was extremely convenient," said Dr. William Goldfarb of Squirrel Hill, a frequent rider who runs an insurance-related business. "It allowed me to get to Harrisburg early enough in the day to conduct business and return the same day."

Before the service began, he'd sometimes get a hotel room in Harrisburg rather than drive the three and a half hours each way the same day. The bus saved him that expense and also allowed him to work as he traveled, Dr. Goldfarb said.

"I had six productive hours on that thing," he said. "Now I have to go back to driving. There's no plane."

Ben McLure, 63, a scout for the Milwaukee Brewers who lives in Hershey, said the only flights to Pittsburgh go through Cincinnati or Charlotte. If he has to scout players in PNC Park for five or six days, the parking fees would cost more than \$100.

Mr. McLure made three trips on the Flyer and "enjoyed the heck out of it," but never saw more than three people on the bus. He can't understand why more state workers didn't ride it.

Linda Payne, 53, an independent health care consultant in Weirton, W.Va., made four round trips on the bus. She'd drive Downtown to take the 6:15 a.m. bus from the Hilton, and use the Internet and make conference calls as she rode.

"I didn't have to worry about tolls, didn't have to worry about gas, didn't have to worry about wear and tear on my car. I worked for three and a half hours."

Seeing so few on the bus with her, she wondered why there wasn't more advertising. She'd considered taking her two grandchildren to the amusement park in Hershey via the bus, to take advantage of the Flyer's half-price fares for children under 15, but now that's out. She'll probably take the last Flyer when it departs Harrisburg next Thursday at 4 p.m.

George DeBolt, the third-generation chief of the DeBolt transportation companies in Homestead, partnered with Mr. Posner and Bob Pietrandrea, officers of Railroad Development Corp. in Green Tree, to launch the Flyer.

Mr. DeBolt complimented his partners for their innovation and "putting their money where their mouth was." There are about 30 bus services of this kind between Washington and New York City, but "we needed 44 passengers a day to make it work and we were lucky if we got 20."

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