

New Harrisburg bus service a Capitol gain for Pittsburgh

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By Tom Barnes and Tracie Mauriello, Post-Gazette Harrisburg Bureau

The best slogan for business people, lawyers, legislators and others who have to travel from Pittsburgh to the state Capitol might be "you can't get there from here."

OK, that's a bit of an overstatement. But there is no air travel, now that US Airways has ended its flights. There is one daily Amtrak train, which pokes along, making many stops, and takes about six hours to make the trip. Greyhound offers bus routes that take four to six hours each way.

The vast majority of travelers must take the Pennsylvania Turnpike, about a four-hour drive, depending on traffic and construction.

"There used to be a number of flights to Harrisburg every day, but then flights became fewer and more expensive," said Chuck Kolling, a lobbyist with Pittsburgh-based Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney, who travels frequently between the two cities.

Contrast the Steel City situation with travel from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, where there are seven daily flights back and forth. Also, several daily Amtrak trains make a one-way trip in 90 minutes to two hours. And once you get to Philly, it's not hard to continue on the train to New York City.

Three entrepreneurs from Pittsburgh -- business partners Henry Posner III and Robert Pietrandrea and well-known bus company operator George DeBolt - have come up with a new alternative for travel to and from Harrisburg.

The Steel City Flyer bus service, which kicks off Nov. 24, grew from their personal experiences trying to get to and from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg, Philly and New York. A one-way trip will cost \$69.

"We came up with the idea because trying to get out of Pittsburgh to go anywhere is almost impossible," Mr.

Pietrandrea said yesterday. "And anymore, flying from Pittsburgh to New York City is a crapshoot."

He said the new bus will stop at the Harrisburg transportation center, where passengers can transfer to an Amtrak train for the ride to Philadelphia or on to the Big Apple.

One time, because of canceled flights and long airport delays, "it took me 25 hours to get [by plane] from Pittsburgh to Princeton, N.J. -- a distance of under 350 miles," said Mr. Posner, a partner with Mr. Pietrandrea in Railroad Development Corp. of Pittsburgh.

"In another case, I was in New York City when my flight home was proactively canceled eight hours in advance because the airline thought that the weather might be bad," he said. "My experience has suggested that there has to be a better way."

Working with Mr. DeBolt, they will lease two Daimler Mercedes-Benz luxury coaches for twice-daily, nonstop round trips from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg and back. The buses will be used until two custom-built luxury coaches are ready.

"This is a great idea -- it's the private sector at its best," said Rep. Mike Turzai, R-Bradford Woods, who drives to the Capitol.

Currently, train passengers who want to make a day trip from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg have one option. Boarding time is 7:20 a.m., and the train arrives in the capital at 12:45 p.m. The only train back departs less than two hours later, arriving in Pittsburgh at 8:05 p.m. The cost is \$36 each way.

Philadelphia train travelers have more choices. They can choose from 10 weekday trains into Harrisburg and 10 back home. The cost is \$23 each way.

Pittsburghers who prefer to travel by bus have several schedule options, but most are more costly than train service, and some routes take more than seven

hours each way. Greyhound offers seven trips from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg and six return trips each day at costs ranging from \$70 to \$79 round-trip.

Jim Parks, executive director of the Pittsburgh-based Eckert Seamans law firm, is eager for the new bus service to start.

"We have an office in Harrisburg and travel has become a lot tougher without the flights," he said. "We have a number of people who work in both offices, attorneys, government relations people, marketing people, and it's a tedious drive. We think this bus service will be a good alternative to driving."

Also interested is Barbara McNees, president of the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, who travels frequently between the two cities when the Legislature is in session.

"There are a lot of days I drive to Harrisburg and back to Pittsburgh in the same day, and it makes for a long day when you do that," she said. "And I could get some work done when I'm riding on the bus."

Legislators often travel back and forth, almost exclusively by car.

"Even with the moderating price of gasoline, this bus should be an attractive alternative," said Rep. Don Walko, D-North Side.

US Airways (and its predecessors) have offered air service between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg for 70 years, until September.

An online reservation system for the new bus should be in operation in about a month. More information is available at www.steelcityflyer.com.

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08313/926410-52.stm>

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