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TARC to keep trolley rides free through at least January

By Sheldon S. Shafer • sshafer@courier-journal.com • October 15, 2010

Rides on the Fourth Street and the Main-Market trolleys will remain free at least through Jan. 31, and the Transit Authority of River City and downtown interests hope to keep the no-fare runs permanent.

Trolley ridership has risen markedly since the 50-cent fare was removed and the frequency of runs was increased on the two circulator routes in early June.

"It was a successful summer. We want people to get downtown and enjoy what it has to offer," said TARC Executive Director Barry Barker.

In April TARC proposed eliminating the Fourth Street line and cutting back service on the Main-Market line to help offset a projected revenue shortfall. But, TARC joined with four agencies a month later and put together about \$50,000 to offer the trolley service free from June 7 to Aug. 15. Some additional funding was also made available from a downtown development agency's reserves.

Ridership quickly soared. According to a survey, a weekday average of 318 passengers rode the 4th Street trolley in July 2009, compared with 621 in July 2010 when rides were free. TARC said 230 passengers on the average weekday in July 2009 rode the Main-Market line, compared with 1,050 in July 2010 after fares were lifted.

The free rides were so popular that Barker said TARC's board decided to absorb the full cost of the service since mid-August, through at least Jan. 31. The cost is expected to be \$30,000 to \$35,000 a month, Barker said. Humana Inc. helps pay for the Main-Market trolleys through an annual contract with TARC worth about \$350,000 that allows its employees to ride any TARC bus free.

In the meantime, Barker said TARC continues to negotiate with the four agencies on a permanent plan to subsidize the trolleys and keep the rides free. The agencies are; the Downtown Development Corp., the city's point agency on urban projects; the Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau; the Louisville Downtown Management District, which uses a property-tax levy that pays a crew to monitor downtown's security and upkeep; and the Kentucky State Fair Board, which operates the Kentucky International Convention Center and the KFC Yum! Center.

Patti Clare, the Downtown Development Corp.'s deputy director, said the agency "definitely would like to see (the free rides) sustained. The question is how best we can support it. The trolleys are really important because of the (large) size of downtown."

"I love them," Deborah King said as she waited for a trolley near the Galt House. "I can't walk as much as I used to, because of arthritis in my leg. I don't have a car, and I need the trolley to get to work."

King lives in Butchertown and rides the trolley to her two jobs at the Galt House and at The Brown hotel. "I wish it (the trolley) would run on Sunday," when she sometimes works and has to



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take a regular bus, she said, adding that she is pleased that the trolley rides will remain free.

The Fourth Street trolley began running in 1987, while the Main-Market route began in 1996. Fares were imposed and raised several times, topping out at 50 cents in 2007. The Fourth Street route is from Theater Square near Broadway to the Galt House, while the Main-Market trolleys run between Campbell and Ninth streets.

The Fourth Street trolleys operate from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays, while the Main-Market coaches run from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. weekdays, with the earlier start intended to accommodate workers at [Humana](#) and other corporate offices on or near Main. Both routes operate from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday, with no Sunday service.

Since the free rides took effect, the frequency of runs has been increased on both routes, with Fourth Street trolleys running every seven minutes most of the day and Main-Market buses running roughly every 10 minutes. Trolleys previously ran about 15 minutes apart on both lines during the week. TARC has 14 trolleys, each with a capacity of around 25 riders.

The convention bureau provided \$8,000 and TARC \$4,000 to hire IQS Research to survey trolley riders. The firm interviewed 186 riders between July 14 and Aug. 4; about half the people interviewed were riding the Fourth Street line and about half the Main-Market route.

The survey found that about 40 percent of trolley riders were visitors from out of town and that 90 percent of all the riders expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the trolley service. More than 70 percent said the trolley was essential or important in getting to destinations, and 53 percent said they would be more likely to ride a trolley if they were free.

The survey also included questionnaires filled out by nine downtown developers and telephone interviews with 16 downtown retailers. The

majority of the business and commercial interests believed that the trolley provides exposure to business, adds to a sense of identity to downtown and enhances the ability of people to get around and see downtown.

Barker said the Medical Center Circulator trolleys that serve the medical complex east of downtown continue to cost 50 cents to ride and will not be brought into the no-fare program because they are "a different type service" and not intended to help promote tourism.

In a related development, Barker said TARC and other officials will monitor traffic before and after events at the new KFC Yum! Center and may develop a plan to tie in trolley service to arena activities.

Reporter Sheldon S. Shafer can be reached at (502) 582-7089.



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