




# PLANNING TO RIDE SMART



# Mississippi State University plans to expand its parking and transit operations, and thinks creatively about financing it all.

By Mike Harris

Over the last few years, Mississippi State University has experienced historic growth. This increase is a national trend, from the numbers I have seen in academia. Factors behind our institution's recent growth include the economic climate that has slowed job creation and the realization that the world has changed and one must commit to lifelong learning just to keep up.

The unprecedented growth is causing parking professionals to ask whether we should continue to build more parking or invest in transit to ease the strain. The answer is never as clear as one would hope, and there is no perfect answer that fits every campus environment.

Mississippi State decided to proceed using a combination of the two—build more parking and expand transit. We will construct strategically placed parking areas on campus and, at the same time, expand the current transit system into the city—which doesn't now have public transportation—to balance the added demand.

Currently, the university operates an on-campus transit service that began in 1996 with four shuttles and two routes. It, like our university, has continued to grow, and now consists of 20 shuttles and five routes. We operate 11 of the 20 shuttles on daily routes. Currently all routes are operated on campus only.

The university does not require a transit fee from students as some universities do to fund the system. Instead, funding comes from departmental and organizational rentals of the shuttles, and is supplemented by the parking operations department. That translates to a major funding challenge when it came to expanding shuttle service. How would we be able to add shuttles, routes, and stops under the current funding mechanism?

## Finding a Way

To provide a solution, we looked at federal funding to leverage our resources and serve

a real need in our community. We began the project by creating a transit group with membership from the university, Starkville, and community leadership. Our first business was creating a timeline that would walk us through the year-long process. To meet grant submission deadlines, many things had to come together, so we set monthly goals to stay on task. As with most transportation projects, the basic questions that needed to be answered were: who will we serve, what type of system will it be, where will it go, and how much will it cost?

The goals were clearly defined:

- Reduce traffic congestion.
- Reduce the need to build more campus parking.
- Reduce the area's carbon footprint.
- Connect the city and campus.
- Improve the overall quality of life by connecting healthcare, banking, public housing, retail, and recreational areas.

## Working Together

Another item that had to be addressed was a comprehensive InterLocal agreement between the university and the city. This agreement needed to spell out our partnership and what each organization will contribute to the overall project, including in-kind contributions and easements for shuttle shelters.

A mass transit study was completed to identify our target areas and begin the process of mapping the proposed routes and shuttle stops. We wanted a system that was efficient, economical, dependable, safe, and environmentally friendly; in other words, a SMART



system. The chosen acronym stands for Starkville-MSU Area Rapid Transit.

The SMART proposal includes the five current campus routes and suggests three additional city routes. The first additional route will be the city-campus connector, which will operate from our historic downtown district to the heart of campus. The route also will pass through the Cotton District residential area along the way. This area consists of several city blocks of residential housing, restaurants, and various other hot spots. The route will use this scenic corridor for easy access and a much-needed connector between our campus and downtown district.

The second of the three routes will be a city circular route that will create a loop around Starkville, connecting a variety of retail outlets, medical and pharmacy establishments, and public housing areas.

The third and final route will connect our campus with the city recreational areas, consisting of parks, athletic fields, and indoor recreational facilities. It will also make stops at several residential housing areas that have large student populations.

The combination of these city and campus routes will create a transit network with eight separate routes, operating 17 shuttles every day.

### Exploring Solutions

Establishing routes based on the transit study and much deliberation was the first step; the next was to determine the stop locations. Our group, along with additional community and university leaders, went for a ride on one of the shuttles to determine the best place to create stops. Many factors went in to this decision, including sidewalk access and safety issues. We also considered whether we should construct a shelter at each stop or use existing resources. For example, our hospital has an overhang that allows one to get out of the weather; using it allowed us to save on the expense of a shelter at that location.

We completed our study of the stops and shelter locations, and then moved on to the type of shelters. To some, this may not seem an important step. To create a sense of permanence and stability, however, the construction of shelters is a key component.

The shelters will each have an LED ETA sign along with a scrolling bar that will communicate emergency and updated information in real time. We currently use a real-time GPS tracking system with our campus transit system, and this will simply be an extension

of that service. The most frequent patron question is, “When will the bus come?” The real-time GPS system answers this question and will be instrumental in the success of the system.


Much progress had been made concerning goals, routes, stops, shelters, and communications. It was now time to decide on operational times. This took considerable thought. Should we operate seven days a week, 12 hours a day? What should be the appropriate operational schedule?

After much deliberation, we made the decision to operate a 12-month schedule that runs from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday on the city routes. The schedule will allow those beginning work or class to be there by the most frequent beginning time—8 a.m.—and return after 5 p.m., which is when most end their work day.

The campus routes will be a little different. They will also begin at 7 a.m. and operate until 6 p.m., but only run Monday to Friday. They will also operate only nine months of the year, based on the availability of additional parking during the summer months. The adjusted hours and times helped tremendously from a funding standpoint.

All of these plans are contingent on the success of our grant application, the 5311 Public Transit Grant. Submitted March 1, the application is currently pending. Receiving the grant will be a game-changer for our campus and surrounding community. It will help the university provide transportation to and from campus at no cost, as well as eliminate vehicles and create a more pedestrian-friendly campus with better parking options.

The expanded service into the city will provide a valuable service to our citizens who may not otherwise have transportation or are feeling the additional burden of higher transportation costs.

We’re in a unique position of having the potential to provide a public transportation option in a city that does not currently have that option. Because Mississippi State has a transit system in place, it already has the infrastructure, administration, and experience to expand the benefits to our community. As we continue down the road of expansion and eventually witness the transition from SOVs to public transit, the future can only be summed up in one word: SMART. 

*Editor’s Note: The Parking Professional will report back on the university’s progress in a future issue.*



**MIKE HARRIS** is director of parking operations for Mississippi State University. He can be reached at [gmh22@msstate.edu](mailto:gmh22@msstate.edu) or 662.325.1827