

Lunch Express (Smart Commute 404-7)

Organization

Smart Commute 404-7

Status

Ongoing. Launched December 2006

Overview

The Lunch Express is a free, frequent service (15-minute intervals) bus shuttle service that carries office workers to and from nearby restaurants and shops during lunch hours on Fridays, the day most office workers eat lunch outside the office. The service operates in a 4.5 kilometre loop between two large business parks (Beaver Creek and Commerce Valley) in the Markham-Richmond Hill area north of Toronto.

The service is coordinated by Smart Commute 404-7, a transportation management association that promotes commuting alternatives to the single occupant vehicle. Lunch Express was launched in December 2006 as a 16-week pilot project to reduce lunch hour traffic and to alleviate parking problems at area shops and restaurants during the busy lunch hour rush. The Lunch Express service was extended following the pilot, but on a Friday-only schedule.

Since its launch, the program has been very successful with up to 60 people riding the Lunch Express a day. In addition, there are currently 25 restaurants participating in the Lunch Express program by offering a 10 per cent discount on their meals for Lunch Express riders.

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Resources

More information is available on the Lunch Express is available at:

www.smartcommute404-7.ca/Lunch_Express.htm

Community context

The Town of Markham and the Town of Richmond Hill are located to the immediate north-east of Toronto and are part of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Both municipalities have experienced rapid development and are among the fastest growing communities in Ontario, witnessing growth rates over 20% from 2001 to 2006. Both municipalities have also experienced considerable development of their employment areas, particularly in the area near the intersection of Highway 404 and Regional Highway 7.

While the regional transit provider, York Region Transit, provides excellent services, they still face the challenge of effectively serving relatively dispersed population and employment centres during off peak periods. A large number of commuter trips are made between and through the two suburban communities, and most of these are made by car because transit services are not frequent or convenient outside a few key corridors.

Statistics show that the average Richmond Hill household owns 1.9 cars -- nearly twice the rate of Toronto households. During peak commuting hours, more than 75 per cent of the vehicles on the road hold one person each (Smart Commute 404-7).

Smart Commute 404-7 is a local transportation management association delivering transportation demand management programs and services, particularly in the corridors created by Highway 404 and Highway 7 and Markham Centre. It was formed when the municipalities of Richmond Hill and Markham joined forces with the Regional Municipality of York, the Richmond Hill Chamber of Commerce, the Markham Board of Trade and

local business leaders to improve mobility and accessibility in the two communities. Additional funding and support was provided by Transport Canada through their Urban Transportation Showcase Program which selected Smart Commute as one of eight sustainable transportation Showcase projects across Canada. The program was recently recognized by the Transportation Association of Canada with the 2006 Sustainable Urban Transportation Award.

As an alternative commuting program, Smart Commute promotes public transit, teleworking, carpooling and parking management, while capitalizing on the shared expertise and resources of the partners to reduce traffic congestion, increase mobility, and create more livable communities.

Since its inception, Smart Commute 404-7 has engaged over 100 businesses in reducing over 100,000 vehicle kilometres of travel for commuters in Richmond Hill and Markham. In addition to Lunch Express, Smart Commute 404-7 has also been successful in offering programs such as Carpool Zone, a commuter ride matching program, which now has over 1,200 home and work based registered users in the immediate area and 6,000 across the GTA.

Policy context

Richmond Hill's 2006 Transportation Master Plan identifies transit-based and alternative focus on moving people as opposed to moving the single occupant vehicle. The City of Markham also supports the creation of more sustainable transportation systems.

Transportation demand management (TDM) measures that modify travel behaviours are viewed by both municipalities as an important complement to the provision of infrastructure and services for transit, carpooling, cycling and walking.

One such TDM initiative is Smart Commute – 407. Named for the two primary corridors serving the two communities -- Highway 404 and Regional Highway 7 -- Smart Commute 404-7 is part of a

network of transportation management associations across the Greater Toronto Area that promote commuter options to business associations and employers. Smart Commute 404-7 is aided by a regional Smart Commute Association that provides tools, centralized coordination and promotion services.



A Lunch Express bus

Rationale and objectives

Major employment centres, or business parks, are clustered near Highways 404 and 407 and the regional Highway 7 in the border area between Markham and Richmond Hill. Together, the Commerce Valley and Beaver Creek business parks served by the Lunch Express account for well over 10,000 jobs and almost 2,000 businesses.

While both business parks boast numerous restaurants, shops and other services, many office workers choose to drive to these establishments given the distances between them and poor transit services. This has led to lunch time congestion and overcrowded parking lots at the restaurant and shopping areas.

The rationale for the Lunch Express service is to reduce unnecessary lunch time congestion and to increase business for participating businesses -- Lunch Express riders receive 10 per cent off of their meal at participating restaurants -- while minimizing parking issues at the businesses.

Running only on Thursdays and Fridays, the objectives of the four month pilot was to reduce

overall vehicle kilometres travelled by 10,000 kilometres and to eliminate the emission of 2,000 kilograms of carbon dioxide.

Actions

The pilot phase of the Lunch Express shuttle bus service operated between December 2006 and March 2007. It provided service on a 4.5 kilometre loop between the Commerce Valley and Beaver Creek business parks from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays, the days when most office workers eat out of the office.

After a successful pilot period, the service was continued, but on a Friday-only schedule. The route was also expanded northwards for a six-month test period to take in additional business park areas. After six months, the northern loop section did not attract sufficient rider numbers and the route was scaled back to its original loop.

Lunch Express charters buses from York Region Transit at a special discount rate. The buses use existing bus stops on the loop route, most of which are conveniently located next to restaurant clusters and larger office complexes. Lunch Express operates on a 15-minute service.

In total, there have been over 1,000 boardings on the system with daily boarding numbers peaking at 60.

Lunch Express has carried out several surveys of riders, both on-line at the Smart Commute 404-7 site and intercept surveys on the service itself. The responses have been overwhelmingly positive and helped program staff fine tune the service. Riders who complete the on-line survey are eligible to win gift certificates for participating Lunch Express restaurants.

Participants

The Lunch Express pilot project was supported by the Town of Markham and the Town of Richmond Hill, York Region Transit, the Richmond Hill Chamber of Commerce, the Markham Board of

Trade and the Smart Commute 404-7 Transportation Management Association.

Currently, there are almost 30 restaurants participating in the service by offering Lunch Express riders 10 per cent off of meals. Most of the participating restaurants also provide gift certificates that are given away to Lunch Express riders as prizes and incentives for using the service and for filling out on-line surveys on the service. Eight restaurants are also paying a small monthly fee (\$50) to Lunch Express to help support the system and the business it brings them.



Program partner representatives at the launch of the Lunch Express pilot project

Resources

The cost of providing the Lunch Express service for 2007 has been estimated at approximately \$26,000. This includes marketing materials (promotional posters, flyers, etc.), bus charter fees and program administration. Together the Town of Markham and the Town of Richmond Hill have provided approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total cost. Smart Commute and the private sector (through the monthly service fees paid by some participating restaurants) make up the rest.

Lessons learned

Some of the key lessons learned in developing and implementing the Lunch Express pilot project included:

- **Marketing is key, but challenging:** Marketing the Lunch Express service has

been difficult. Many office complex managers do not permit posters or other advertising in office complex lobbies, elevators or washrooms. To date, Lunch Express marketing efforts have relied on mail outs to individual businesses and word-of-mouth promotion. Lunch Express has also been successful in getting positive newspaper coverage in both the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star.

- **Transportation behaviour change starts small:** While Lunch Express is relatively small program, one of its great successes is simply introducing people to alternative forms of transportation. Surveys indicate that many riders do not use transit for other travel and that Lunch Express is their first transit experience. The positive experience of Lunch Express in such an auto-dependent environment may encourage riders users to try transit for other trips.
- **Show results:** Most of the private sector partners (i.e., the restaurants) want to see “results” for their involvement in the program. It is important to provide these groups rider numbers and to work with them to monitor and identify any increases in their Friday lunches that can be attributed to Lunch Express to maintain and grow their involvement.

Next steps

The Lunch Express service will be continued for 2008 on the same schedule and service delivery model. Project organizers are working with partner restaurants to increase the proportion of private sector funding for the service and to further build ridership.

Smart Commute 404-7 has received queries from a large mall operator who is interested in replicating the Lunch Express model at their mall.