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Metro's Wheelchair Boardings Roll Up a Startling 188 Percent

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(April 28, 2005) In the 11-month period between April 2004 and March 2005, wheelchair ridership on Metro buses soared by as much as 188 percent – from 11,000 to 31,600 wheelchair boardings per month.

ADA Compliance Administrator Chip Hazen, who has spent much of his 30-year transit career working on access issues, finds the surge in wheelchair ridership to be remarkable. He attributes the increase in boardings to a number of factors, including better equipment and bus operator courtesy, and believes the growth will continue.

Some of the increase can be attributed to new ATMS technology aboard Metro buses that permits more accurate monitoring of wheelchair boardings. But, Hazen believes that at least half the 20,000 increase represents new wheelchair riders.

Among the other factors that may have contributed to more wheelchair riders is a decision several years ago by the Board of Directors to allow wheelchair passengers – and their personal care assistants – to ride free on Metro buses.

Another reason could be that new low-floor buses with easier-to-use wheelchair ramps now make up a greater percentage of Metro's fleet.

'Cut the time in half'

"The lifts on high-floor buses took about two minutes to bring a wheelchair aboard, while the ramps on low-floor buses take less than a minute," says Hazen. "We've cut the time in half just by having a different type of bus out there."

He also notes that the number of complaints about accessibility – including operators failing to call stops, inoperative lifts and passups – has not increased in the past three years.

Wheelchair Boardings Elsewhere in the Nation

In Orange County, OCTA wheelchair boardings on the 817 buses in daily fixed route service were relatively stable in the first quarter of calendar 2004 compared with the first quarter of calendar 2005 – about 43,000 boardings each quarter.

A spokesman speculated that the wet weather earlier this year affected OCTA's first quarter wheelchair boardings. He noted, however, that in the good-weather month of July 2004, OCTA recorded its highest number of wheelchair boardings – 17,681.

In New York, the MTA averaged 35,482 disabled boardings a month on its buses in 2004, according to a spokeswoman. She said that most boardings are by wheelchair passengers, although lifts also may be used by other disabled patrons. The agency operates 3,850 buses during peak periods.

The ADA administrator for WMATA in Washington, D.C., says an average of 11,000 wheelchair passengers ride the system's 1,400 buses each month. Currently, only about 94 percent of the fleet is accessible, although WMATA has 250 new buses with wheelchair equipment on order and plans to replace its 110 non-accessible buses first. The entire Metro rail system is accessible to the disabled.

A spokesman for the Chicago Transit Authority said his agency

"I attribute this to our operators," says Hazen. "They do an excellent job."

One other hint that wheelchair ridership has gone up is a reported decrease in the number of disabled riders using Access Services' curb-to-curb paratransit service. That ridership fell about four percent from calendar year 2003 to 2004.

"People are figuring out that our system is easier to use than the paratransit service," says Hazen. "They don't have to make an appointment and wait to be picked up. They can just go out to the bus stop and be assured that a bus will stop for them."

boards about 13,000 wheelchair passengers a month on its 1,700 buses in regular daily service. The number of boardings also reflects some passengers who may be disabled, but are not in wheelchairs.

Metro counts only wheelchair passengers in its monthly wheelchair boarding figures, according to Chip Hazen, ADA Compliance Administrator.

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