

A Slow DASH

by Andrew Moyle

The complaints are true. The DASH seems to come when it wants to.

A month-long *Los Angeles Downtown News* investigation involving little more than a cell-phone clock and a lot of standing around has found that the six DASH lines serving Downtown hit their stops in an erratic fashion.

DASH buses scheduled to stop at five-minute intervals can arrive 30 seconds or a dozen minutes apart. Lines scheduled at 20-minute intervals can take 17 minutes or a half hour between buses, regardless, evidently, of whether riders feel lucky. Even the Department of Transportation acknowledges the problems.

"You have to kind of hope for the best," said Eddie Ross, a South Los Angeles resident who takes the DASH Southeast Route to a stop for the Downtown-bound F Route between Exposition Park and USC.

"It seems like it gets here when it gets here. It's on its own time," Ross added.

Whatever the preliminary findings of a review that DASH hopes to put out next month, part of an effort to revamp the system and add possible nighttime service in response to changing Downtown Los Angeles demographics, anecdotal evidence has spotty arrivals costing the DASH customers, and waiting around doesn't help create converts.

The 'Late' Show

A recent mid-morning hour spent at City National Bank Plaza on Flower Street between Fifth and Sixth streets showed it all. The spot is a nexus of four DASH lines: Route A from Little Tokyo to City West; Route B from Chinatown to the Financial District; Route C from the Financial District to South Park; and Route F from the Financial District to Exposition Park and USC.

During the course of the hour, Route A buses are scheduled to arrive every five minutes, but on the day in question they came anywhere from one to 10 minutes apart. Route B buses, scheduled to arrive every eight minutes, had waits ranging from four to 10 minutes.

The hour's bright spot: Route F buses were nearly on time, arriving 10 minutes apart with one wait of 11 minutes and another of six.

The only one of the four routes with scheduled stop times instead of scheduled intervals, Route C buses bound for California Hospital are supposed to stop every 20 minutes at City National Bank Plaza: at 9:19, 9:39 and 9:59 a.m.

In reality: 9:16, 9:33 and 10 a.m. on the dot. Not a big deal for those prepared to arrive at their stop early, but a potential problem for people carrying DASH schedules to catch the 9:39 for a 9:46 arrival at California Hospital. Especially, say, for a 10 a.m. appointment.

The scheduling jumbles were repeated elsewhere - at Patsaouras Transit Plaza, in front of Union Station, around the Seventh Street/City West loop and in the Arts District, Historic Core and South

Park. They occurred throughout the day.

The results are not a surprise, even to those who oversee DASH. They admit there have been problems throughout DASH's 20-plus years of service.

"It's always been problematic in Downtown, with street closures and filming and traffic, whatever it may be," said Jim Lefton, chief of transit for the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, which contracts DASH service to Cincinnati-based First Transit Services, Inc.

In fiscal year 2004-2005, the DASH was on schedule 92% of the time, Lefton said. However, the contract's definition of "late" makes it difficult to gauge the actual performance.

According to the contract's terms, an arrival less than five minutes late is technically on time, even for routes that are scheduled to arrive every five minutes.

Even then, there's little in the way of reporting that takes place, and certainly no incentive for First Transit to do so.

The DOT docks \$500 from First Transit's monthly invoice for every "incident," a term that, Lefton explained, could ostensibly consist of every time a bus is late, but more often involves overall monthly goals.

The DOT has historically used a number of sources to gauge the performance of its 50 Downtown DASH buses operating on any given weekday, including customer comment cards, a transit store phone line, an online comment section and the odd staff time check. But resources are thin.

"It's tough, in part because we don't have a large staff that can go out and monitor every trip," Lefton said. "We do look at the customer complaints, but not everybody complains on every trip that was late. Obviously we expect that when the contractor's buses are late that we're made aware of that, but we don't have guarantees that the information we get is 100% accurate."

Once the buses are late, not much can be done to catch them up, said Mike Griffin, who oversees the 66 buses of the Downtown DASH fleet for the DOT.

"Sometimes if the bus is empty, we'll have that bus leapfrog ahead to get back on schedule," Griffin said. "There's any number of little things that happen like that, but a lot of times if you get behind Downtown, it's pretty hard to catch back up."

Costing Customers

Virginia Pilapil still takes the DASH from the Seventh Street Metro Rail Station to finish her commute to the Fashion District from Pasadena, but sometimes she doesn't know why.

"It'll be okay, maybe a minute [late], five times in a row, but the next one I'm standing there waiting," she said.

And waiting, and waiting. Pilapil's comments reflected what many surveyed by Downtown News said: The DASH is clean, comfortable and reasonably speedy, and the drivers are among the nicest in Los Angeles. With her transit pass, Pilapil's free ride makes for an easy call.

Still, she knows that it could just as easily have cost her.

"I've been working long enough that I don't get into trouble if I'm a few minutes late. My boss knows it's not my fault," she said.

Not everyone is as lucky. Few coming Downtown have the luxury to take those risks, and once burned, they aren't likely to repeat the DASH experience.

Lefton knows this, and he said the DOT is beginning to regulate DASH service the same way as Metro Rapid service does, using transponders and the city's Automated Traffic Surveillance and Control loops buried in the asphalt.

"We may want to install additional loop detectors, but it's a start," he said.

The preliminary results of the DOT's survey, conducted exclusively among Downtown residents, will be delivered next month. It will review DASH service and provide an idea of the community's desire for nighttime service.

"There's potential there," Lefton said. "We'll just have to see what it is."

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