

## Pace eyes use of shoulders

**Bus officials tout faster commutes along side of road**

July 27, 2001 | By Rogers Worthington, Tribune staff reporter.

When rush-hour traffic slows to a halt, the road's shoulders sit vacant and inviting, a wide open but forbidden highway.

Few drivers succumb to that temptation, and those who do risk a \$75 fine.

But Pace bus service [Executive](#) Director Thomas J. Ross looks at those empty shoulders as escape hatches that his Pace buses could use.

Pace buses are prominent victims of roadway congestion in the Chicago area, he said Thursday at a congressional hearing in Chicago on transit issues.

"Our system speed now averages about 14 m.p.h.," Ross said.

Ross blames that speed for long commutes and a resulting loss in riders throughout the six-county suburban bus system. He hopes to address part of the speed problem with express routes and with high-tech [solutions](#) such as a device that would allow bus drivers to extend green lights.

But in the end, there is only so much tweaking to be done with traffic controls and schedules.

So when Ross heard about buses moving past gridlocked traffic in the Twin Cities region of Minnesota by using shoulders, he and Regional Transportation Authority Executive Director Richard Bacigalupo went up to have a look. They came back impressed.

"This is one way to look at congestion," Bacigalupo said. "I think it's something we need to investigate."

Ross has already made proposals to the Illinois Department of Transportation and the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority to allow buses to use shoulders at congestion choke points.

Traditionally, highway shoulders are reserved for disabled vehicles, maintenance equipment and emergency vehicles.

But Metro Transit, the RTA for the Twin Cities, has been expanding the use of shoulders by buses since they began experimenting with the idea in 1992. The agency's buses now use shoulder segments that add up to 120 miles on freeways and arterial highways.

Twin Cities buses are only allowed to use shoulders when traffic is stop-and-go or slow-and-go, said Aaron Isaacs, manager of facilities planning for Metro Transit.

"We instruct our drivers to run no **faster** than 15 m.p.h. more than the flow of traffic" while using the shoulders, Isaacs said. Top speed for buses to run on the shoulders is 35 m.p.h., he said.

"If a bus were running at 50-55 m.p.h. on a shoulder, I don't think that would be a safe operation," he said. "Operating at lower speeds, that's what makes it safe."

Isaacs said there have been no serious accidents in the nine years Metro Transit has been using shoulders, but there have been a few sideswipes each year.

For a bus to be able to use a shoulder, the shoulder must be at least 10 feet wide and preferably 12 feet, to accommodate a bus 8.5 feet wide, Isaacs said. Also, the shoulder must be constructed as sturdily as the road itself.

Isaacs says the use of shoulders can cut 15 to 25 minutes off some bus trips.

"If there is any congestion, we will be faster," he said. "The **customers** know that no matter what, we're probably going to beat the car."

He considers it a good marketing **tool**, and although he had no numbers at his fingertips Thursday, he is convinced it has helped ridership. The practice even won the approval of the Federal Highway Administration.

Yet for all its appeal, Isaacs has no explanation of why the idea has not spread to other cities.

Some of the hesitation may be reflected in questions being asked by Diane O'Keefe, engineer of program development for IDOT in the Chicago area.

O'Keefe has concerns about shoulders that narrow on bridges; shoulders that cross exit and entrance ramps; and the distance between buses, adjacent vehicles, guardrails, lighting and signs on the shoulder.

Among other concerns, she said, is how the driving public will react to seeing buses move out on shoulders that other motorists may not use.

IDOT has asked Ross to answer these concerns, propose a few routes he is considering for shoulder use and provide traffic volume from the Twin Cities area where buses now use shoulders.

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