

Passengers worry over bus services

As CMRTA faces funding cuts, many say they rely on city transportation

Life in a wheelchair hasn't slowed Vicki Powell much. But an interruption in the area's bus services could.

"I wouldn't be going anywhere, except maybe to church, to work and back home," she said.

The Columbia woman is part of a local culture that relies on the Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority bus system to reach work, run errands, make doctors' appointments and otherwise navigate the community.

The 37-year-old Powell, who has spine a bifida, is a regular passenger on DART, an umbrella program of the transit system especially equipped for handicapped riders.

For her and the 10,000 others who take the buses each day, the transit system serves as the primary connector to major points around the metropolitan area — courtesy of 1,365 stops along 383 round-trip miles.

"I would just say that it's a good system," said Powell, a Babcock Center mailroom employee.

But by year's end, those \$1.25 one-way trips could be in jeopardy.

The CMRTA bus system is running out of money. Unless a dedicated source of funding can be found, the bus system could face significant cutbacks.

For passengers like Powell, that would mean fewer hours to catch the bus, longer waits at stops and the loss of some routes. Weekend and holiday service also would be discontinued.

Earlier this week on route 16, which runs between Columbia Mall and downtown Columbia, some of the conversations centered on the struggling bus system and the prospects of life without it.

For **Nicole Grant**, those prospects are frightening.

Grant moved to the area six months ago and since then has relied almost totally on bus transportation to get around town.

"I don't drive," Grant said. "This is my only means of transportation. I don't ride a bike."

As a housekeeper in the National Advocacy Center at the University of South Carolina, Grant is particularly unnerved at the prospect of no weekend bus service. Her job will require her to work on weekends once students return in the fall.

But her dependence on the bus system doesn't end at the workplace.

"When I'm not working, I use it to go out shopping, do laundry," she explained.

Her story was all too familiar to her bus driver, **Lucious Williams**. Once a regular rider himself, Williams said he knows the hardships many would face if the bus system were downgraded.

"They'd be devastated," he said just before boarding a group of summer school students at a stop along Two Notch Road near Keenan High School.

About 30 minutes later, as the same bus (then on route 25) made a stop near Claude A. Taylor Elementary School in Cayce, **Sharon Johnson** and her two children boarded as they headed to a doctor's appointment.

"With no car, we need this," Johnson said.

The Cayce women said she's particularly concerned about what would become of the area's elderly, who depend on public transportation, if service is reduced.

"They would be lost," she said. "Where would they go, and how would they get there?"

Area transit officials will continue searching for ways to head off those problems today during the last of three public hearings scheduled this week. The officials hope the hearings — announced as forums to discuss the proposed cuts to the bus system — will be a rallying point to generate more community support.

RTA driver **Douglas Taylor** fears support will only come when more people recognize many bus riders are the same people the community has come to depend on each day.

"It's that cook, the person that makes your steak just the way you like it," Taylor said.

Powell has another idea for changing minds: She said if more people who don't depend on public transportation would get on a bus — just once — they might view life differently from the inside.

"That might help."

She can't imagine her life without viable public transportation.

She hopes she never has to.

From: The State June 10, 2006