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LANTA Expanding Express Bus Service

More convenient bus service that gets people to the Lehigh Valley's busiest destinations faster will attract more riders and ultimately help the region manage development, while preserving its unique character.

That's the purpose of the Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority's new Enhanced Bus Service (EBS), which uses limited stops and more frequent runs on two key Lehigh Valley routes to get people through the region faster.

EBS, often called Bus Rapid Transit in other regions, first began in the Lehigh Valley in September, with a route carrying people from Easton, through Bethlehem and Allentown and on to the commercial districts of Trexlertown. Running from 5 am to midnight, with limited stops and more frequent runs, what is called Route 101 – Blue Route gets people to key activity spots like downtowns in Easton, Bethlehem and Allentown, the Park and Ride facility in Bethlehem Township, Coca-Cola Park, Muhlenberg College, Dorney Park and Hamilton Crossings.

Beginning June 20, a second enhanced bus route, called Route 100 – Green Route, will be added carrying people from Whitehall, through Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton, covering such stops as Wind Creek Casino and the Park and Ride facility in Hellertown. The idea is to

increase service and speed to the places most used by people for work, shopping and recreation.

“EBS provides fast, frequent and comfortable transit services along a dedicated transit corridor,” said LANTA Executive Director Owen O’Neil. “This provides most of the features expected by both frequent and casual mass transit riders, without the expensive cost of rail.”

EBS has been a long time coming. LANTA first completed a study into the building an EBS system in 2014.

LANTA’s EBS is starting small, with plans to grow in speed, frequency and eventually routes and comfort, O’Neil said. For now, the Easton to Trexlertown route is once per hour, but with the addition of Route 100 – Green Route in June, stops in the most heavily used areas through Allentown and Bethlehem will get buses as often as every 15 minutes. The extra speed comes from making fewer stops – every four blocks, rather than every block, for example. LANTA also plans to establish these fewer stops as station type stops with larger shelters, improved signage and possible ticket machines. And the Easton to Trexlertown route will expand again in September, to 24-hour service, enabling use by workers on overnight shifts.

But future design and technology enhancements – as ridership grows -- will add even more speed. Those could include traffic signals that sense a bus is coming, and automatically adjust the timing to make sure it gets a green light, and sidewalk bump-outs that help keep the bus in the travel lane while passengers board, preventing time-consuming pulling off and into traffic.

Adding fare machines that allow swiping or tapping, rather than feeding cash, would also get the passenger seated and the bus moving more quickly.

Those could happen relatively inexpensively and quickly, O’Neil said. In the longer-term – and for a lot more cost -- bus lanes could be added on some routes, giving transit unimpeded passage through some sections of the region.

And all of this is about a lot more than getting people from point A to point B more easily.

“A viable and convenient transit network will reduce congestion, give people other transportation options and support directing growth to the development areas,” said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley. “Ultimately, that will help us preserve the farmland and open space that help define our identity. This concept, and transit’s role in it, is at the heart of *FutureLV: The Regional Plan*.”

The EBS service comes at a time when LANTA is recovering from drastic ridership losses brought on by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Almost overnight, LANTA users dropped from roughly 16,000 passengers a day to under 4,000 in March of 2020. With more work-from-home options and businesses moving to more online sales, LANTA is now edging back to 11,000 a day – and growing, O’Neil said.

Bus Rapid Transit type systems are in growing use in regions with clearly defined work, shopping and living areas that have enough population to support it. Comparable areas using it include Albany, NY, Battle Creek, MI and Richmond, VA, O’Neil said

The overall goal is a transit system that is used even by people who own cars.

“The goal is a system that’s chosen by riders because it is a convenient option, rather than because they have no other choice,” O’Neil said. “It’s working in other places and it can work here.”