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Columns

Point of View:

Published: May 30, 2008 12:30 AM

Modified: May 30, 2008 06:13 AM

Finding the route to a happy ending

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DURHAM - As the pleasures of twisting compact fluorescent bulbs into all available light sockets around her house ebbed, as melted ice caps flowed into the sea and as gas prices spiked toward \$4 a gallon, my friend Deborah Hooker made a firm decision: It was time to take the bus.

Deborah lives in Clayton, about 18 miles away from her job at N.C. State University. It usually takes her about 25 minutes total to load up her little Saturn, hit the back roads, park and bop across the street to her office. She only occasionally has close misses crossing Hillsborough Street, where some students think that driving 50 mph is the equivalent of good commuting sense.

So what about the bus? After all, the State of North Carolina, post-Katrina, made Triangle buses free for many of its employees. Free is cheap. Feeling virtuous feels awfully good. Reading and writing while you roll? An academic's dream.

You probably realize Deborah's story doesn't have a happy ending.

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FIRST, THERE'S NO BUS SERVICE FROM CLAYTON TO RALEIGH. Nuttin'. As the helpful and polite Triangle Transit Authority employee said in a slightly surprised voice, "Oh, no, ma'am!"

So Deborah has to drive the 7.5 miles to White Oak shopping mall in Garner. There, she parks and hopes she doesn't get towed. That all takes about 20 minutes, including a bit of waiting. She climbs aboard the TTA shuttle, trying to ignore her guilt that people who appear poorer than she are forking over \$2. Then it's a 35-minute ride, with a few stops, down to Moore Square in Raleigh.

With luck, the TTA bus to N.C. State arrives shortly after, and it's just a 10-minute ride. The chances of Deborah getting hit crossing the street once she arrives? About equal. Standard commuting time with a little luck and no traffic tie-ups? About an hour and 20 minutes -- more than three times longer than a car trip.

So the dream, although free, had already started to fade when Deborah tried to reread "Huckleberry Finn" in preparation for her summer literature class lecture. Both book and brain were shaken so badly inside the rattletrap mini-bus that she gave up and just stared fixedly out the window: a prisoner of bad mass transit. That was the same day that the Moore Square bus that should have taken her to N.C. State had an "out of service" sign. The next bus, she was told, wouldn't be leaving for at least another half hour.

Deborah felt a passing obligation to arrive to teach her summer course on time. She hoofed it for 2 miles in the wrong shoes and arrived on campus sporting two fresh blisters with some irritation on top.

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SHE STILL LOVES THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION. She just hates the uneven, underfunded, cobbled-together, push-me/pull-you reality of public transportation in the Triangle, circa 2008. Some parts work. I can take an express TTA bus that goes from downtown Durham to N.C. State and back. It's always full. It takes just a half-hour.

But Deborah's excellent adventure with public transportation has been temporarily suspended while she regroups and her blisters heal. "You know, if I could just read or write on the mini-bus ..." she says wistfully.

No wonder conservative scolding points seem to work so well -- mass transit, as it's practiced around here, does all their work for them.

According to the John Locke Foundation, public transportation is nearly always a "wasteful attempt to entice or coerce commuters out of their personal vehicles and into buses or trains." I do wish public transportation was enticing around here. It could be, and it doesn't have to be wasteful.

As highway commute times mount, and predictions of \$7 a gallon gas start to creep toward reality, single-occupancy starts to feel like singular stupidity. That's without considering carbon footprints or those red-haze days that so delight my asthma. Forbes magazine last month called Raleigh the "second-worst small city in the nation" for commuting.

So while it sounds much more like a hay fever pill than a transportation plan, the "Congestion Relief and Intermodal Transport Fund" recommended by the state's 21st Century Transportation Committee and pending in the legislature holds promise. Charlotte's success with light rail is a model. And the Triangle's Special Transit Advisory Commission just released its recommendations, calling for local sales tax increases that would help fund, among other things, an extensive bus network with new routes from outlying towns.

I pulled up the advisory commission's suggested bus map -- and, sure enough, there was a broad, bright green line running from Clayton straight into Raleigh. And if you have enough patience and foresight and political will to read between that line? You can envision Deborah tranquilly preparing for class as she rolls down the road.

(Cat Warren is communications director at the Common Sense Foundation.)

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