

Fredericton Transit bus fleet may go high-tech

Internet | Webcams, wireless access down the road?

Fredericton Transit is testing wireless capability on five of its newest transit buses before it considers the cost implications of unrolling new service options to the public.

The capital city's effort is following on the heels of Codiac Transit in Moncton. It recently launched its revamped website with a feature called GoBus developed by a Moncton-based firm called Red Ball. GoBus is a mapping system that displays a bus route and the vehicle's real-time position on that route.

The feature is possible because all of Codiac's buses have wireless Internet access that allows passengers to use global positioning system (GPS) technology.

"We've piloted having some wireless capability on the buses. There's a couple of other features we're interested in, one of them being AVL, the automatic vehicle location," said Fredericton Transit manager Sandy MacNeill.

"As well, there's a communications feature associated with it so that we can speak directly to the operators that we're looking at. We're looking for something very similar here with the buses if we can get the coverage. We're just getting a feel for it."

Mike Richard, vice-president of operations of the city-owned e-Novations ComNet Inc. company, said Fredericton is working with Red Ball on the project.

He said they've already conquered one of the problems related to the wireless system.

The city's free Wi-Fi Fred-eZone network is essentially a static system, but the city created a high-speed mobile wireless tower atop the northside depot on St. Mary's Street last summer.

That will allow a passenger on a bus to use a laptop computer, a PDA (personal digital assistant) or smartphone to access the Internet aboard the bus.

"In terms of the tracking of the bus, that will be a web application on top of a Google map so you can actually see where the buses are at all times. They can get it off anything that has a web browser," Richard said.

The city has installed wireless fibre on five test buses and a private call telephone system for the drivers on the same system.

"On one bus we did a public webcam that points out the front window. We expect to have the buscam on our public web page by the end of the month," he said.

"It's probably the coolest public webcam we'll have because it gives the public access to traffic and road conditions because you'll be looking right out the front bus window as the bus drives. It's kind of unique."

Richard said a lot of users check the city's webcams for weather and road conditions.

When Red Ball wanted to come to Fredericton, the city was able to offer the company access to the data exchange utility offered by e-Novations.

"They're a member of our network. They use our Internet, our backhaul, our tower," Richard said.

Red Ball charges the city a fee for its services, while the city charges back fees for network access, which makes the paper transaction revenue-neutral, Richard said.

"We've got a really unique deal with them because we're charging them for tower space and services, and of course, they're charging us, but at the end of the day, it's a wash," Richard said.

"The pilot phase has proved to be very successful. It's been up and running solid since September. The issue is now if we're going to equip the entire fleet of buses. Then we are into real money," he said.

"The city needs to figure out if that's something we should be spending our money on and that's in the hands of senior management and council."

Transportation committee chairman Coun. Bruce Grandy said money will be an issue as the city faces the prospect of new provincial legislation that could limit its access to new property tax revenue.

Grandy said the technology being explored is useful to the public, but will also help the city to deliver improved transit services.

"It will allow our dispatchers to look at the buses and look at routes that aren't as efficient, perhaps diverting buses, and will improve safety on buses for riders and drivers," Grandy said.

"We have to look at all this and see what kind of infrastructure we have to put into place for this," Grandy said.

"Then, of course, it all comes down to money and dollars and cents."