Greenlink to start Clemson route

Weekday round-trip service begins Sept. 9

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The Greenlink bus service has taken another step toward creating a regional mass transit system for the Upstate by establishing a new route between Greenville and Clemson.

The service starts Sept. 9 and will operate on the hour Monday through Friday between 6 a.m. and 11 p.m., said Mark Rickards, Greenlink director.

Greenlink eventually plans a stop or stops in Easley, possibly at the Walmart along U.S. 123, he said, but for now the buses will run nonstop between the Hendrix Student Center on Clemson University's main campus and the university's International Center for Automotive Research in Greenville.

From ICAR, riders will be able to board smaller, connector buses to Greenville Health System's Patewood medical campus, the University Center or Greenlink's downtown operations center.

"Our drivers have been selected. Our buses are ready to go," Rickards said.

He said the fare — $1.50 one way, or $3 round trip — is competitive with the cost of driving a car, given the price of gasoline.

The bus will take about 50 minutes to travel the 35 miles between the Hendrix center and

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ICAR, Rickards said, and another half hour to go from ICAR to downtown, stopping along the way at the GHS campus and University Center.

Rickards said Greenlink might expand the service to weekends if it's justified by the ridership, but likely won't be taking Clemson football fans to and from Death Valley because of traffic congestion on game days.

Clemson students will ride free since they pay a transportation fee as part of their college costs and the university is contributing $420,000 a year to help pay for the new route, Rickards said.

He said Greenlink will chip in about $200,000 a year, all of it from state or federal grants.

From Clemson, the new route will follow U.S. 123 through Easley, then take State 153 through Powdersville and Interstate 85 to Laurens Road and ICAR, Rickards said.

He said Greenlink has ordered a pair of 29-seat, commuter-style buses for the new route.

The buses, which cost $68,000 apiece, will offer WiFi service and softer seats for the longer-than-normal trip, he said.

They're scheduled to arrive in October, and Greenlink will use its regular 37-seat buses in the meantime, Rickards said.

At the student center on the Clemson campus, riders will be able to connect with the Clemson Area Transit service, or CAT bus system, though CAT turned down a chance to participate in the new route, Rickards said.

Because of a change in a federal classification, CAT had to share federal transit funding with Greenlink for the first time this year and was "very disappointed" with the outcome of negotiations between the two systems, said Rick Cotton, city administrator for Clemson, which operates CAT.

He said a federal formula "was unilaterally applied to Clemson" by the Greenville Transit Authority, which operates Greenlink, leaving CAT with a little more than 28 percent of $2.8 million in federal funding for the current fiscal year.

"The goal had been to do a multi-year agreement, but unfortunately we could not agree on even one year so we shortened it," Cotton said. "We did agree to one year and we'll be revisiting it in October."

Cotton said Clemson had hoped to escape the new federal classification by creating its own metropolitan planning organization along with Seneca, Pendleton and Central but the state highway commission rejected the plan.

GTA Chairman Trey Fouche said the negotiations were difficult "but the formula currently being used is fair and equitable."

Greenlink established the first service to Mauldin and Simpsonville last year and down the road would like to connect with Fountain Inn, Travelers Rest and Greer, Rickards said.

In launching the service to Clemson, Greenlink is responding to transportation needs that have emerged as a result of Clemson University's engagement with Greenville over the past decade and the resulting establishment of various research and education centers around town.

Those include ICAR and a biomedical research facility at the GHS campus along Pelham Road.

Clemson also moved its MBA program downtown. It has offered instruction at the University Center on Pleasantburg Drive since the late 1980s.

Today, hundreds of Clemson students and faculty members study or work at those locations and many have regular duties on the university's main campus as well.

Clemson administrators say the need for bus service between Greenville and Clemson is especially acute for students living in Greenville with no cars of their own, many of them from foreign countries.

Those students pay fees for a health service and recreation facility on the main campus but can't really take advantage of them since they are so many miles away from where they live and study.

The students are also far away from one of the fundamental experiences of Tiger life — football games at Death Valley — and the many part-time job opportunities offered through work/study programs on the main campus.

The new bus route is "going to be a wonderful resource for our students, particularly our international students," said Greg Pickett, an associate dean in Clemson's College of Business and Behavioral Science.

He is in charge of the MBA program and related graduate business programs that are scheduled to move into the One development on Main Street early next year. About 460 students are enrolled in those programs, Pickett said.