



Shuttle Bus Mess Makes Getting To The Game Tougher

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Sports fans around the country are facing costlier or longer rides to the game because of a recent federal regulation that restricts the use of public shuttles that people take from train stations or offsite parking to the stadium.

The situation has left NFL teams and schools with major college football programs scrambling for alternatives ahead of the upcoming regular season.

The American Public Transit Association says the regulation — designed to foster free-market competition — instead is pushing riders away from public transport at a moment when gasoline costs 82 cents more per gallon than it did at this time last year. The rule also could mean more traffic congestion as fans opt to drive to stadium-area lots.

"Often, widely attended public events are a rider's way into the system," said Jim LaRusch, general counsel for APTA. "They get on it for the first time and say, 'Hey, this is kind of neat. I wouldn't mind doing this every day.' That could be a problem."

Under a Federal Transit Administration regulation that took effect May 1, local transit authorities no longer can offer game-day shuttle service to fans if that service is: not part the regular schedule; if the fee is higher than the regular fare; or if a team or other group is involved, and negotiate a special price for the service.

The penalty for failure to comply is stiff — loss of federal transportation funding.

"Basically all federal money is in jeopardy. They don't mess around," said Jim McAteer, director of planning for Nashville's Metropolitan Transit Authority.

The Tennessee Titans managed to line up a private company to bus 5,000 fans from remote lots and deliver them to LP Field before Saturday night's exhibition opener against the St. Louis Rams for \$10 each, \$3 higher than the Nashville bus system.

Gaylon Smith said he and other fans would have a tough time getting to the game without a shuttle. "We'd have to find a parking spot close, because that's hard on us older folks (to walk far)," the 63-year-old man said.

Walter and Saletta Holloway of Nashville weren't happy with the price hike. "But what can you do about it?" Saletta Holloway said. "It's a little bit better for us to ride than to walk."

The \$6 shuttles for fans going to see the Washington Redskins are in place through the first two games of the regular season, thanks to a waiver the team obtained. But after that they will disappear. The team isn't planning to replace them because the fee per fan to ride less than a mile from the nearest Metro station would have been \$20.

"It just doesn't make sense," Redskins vice president Karl Swanson said.

Also gone are the \$10 rides that bused 2,550 fans from a light-rail station to Baltimore Ravens' games. The team sent a brochure to season ticket holders explaining the situation.

As it stands now, there won't be shuttles next May to bus 27,000 offsite fans combined to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for the Indy 500 or next July for the Brickyard 400.

The FTA responded to questions via e-mail after a request by The Associated Press to talk to an administration official by telephone. It said the previous regulation had a "pretty big loophole" when it came to drawing the line between public transit services and private companies.

The revision is designed to make it clear when a service should be handled by a private company, keeping public transit authorities from bidding for a shuttle. They can't handle a shuttle if even one private company is interested.

As of Aug. 6, the FTA had received 25 requests for waivers from the rule from various entities. The rule does not only apply to sporting events, although they are among the most affected. It also applies to stadium concerts and even school children in Washington, D.C., who use the local bus system.

"Why should taxpayers subsidize for-profit organizations like professional sports teams that can well afford to pay for shuttle services?" FTA spokesman David Longo wrote in reply to the AP's questions.

"Transit agencies have historically charged less than market rates for its charter services because of the federal subsidy and usually another subsidy from the event sponsor. This has put transit agencies in direct competition with private charter operators for these services and transit agencies always win because public subsidized transit agency rates are lower."

Eron Shosteck, senior vice president of communications for the American Bus Association, called negotiations over the rule an "open and transparent process." He said independent bus owners now have a chance to compete fairly.

"If anything, this is going to be a win-win for game-day ridership because you have true market competition delivering the bus service at the best price," Shosteck said.

LaRusch disagrees. He said the regulation caught transit officials off-guard because earlier versions they had seen in talks with the FTA, the private charter bus industry and others, allowed more room for publicly operated shuttles.

"The system that they've set up now, what we've seen is it allows a very small, distinct portion of the private operators to really skew the industry," LaRusch said.

One of the first events affected was the Kentucky Derby in May, and the Transit Authority of River City got a waiver, so it could still use shuttles.

However, TARC won't be transporting approximately 28,000 fans to and from Churchill Downs for the Kentucky Oaks or Derby in 2009 after using buses for the past 50 years and street cars before that.

"What we're being told by this regulation is we can't do it anymore," said Barry Barker, TARC's executive director. "We've got to turn it over. What we're trying to do is make sure it's turned over in as effective a manner as we can. Would we like to be able to continue to do it? Absolutely."

Barker said the transport authority has written a manual to help whoever takes over the shuttle, but he has lots of unanswered questions about an event he calls "organized chaos," involving up to 30 people just helping direct buses and take tickets.

Some transit authorities and private companies have found a way to work together.

Summer shuttles to the Hollywood Bowl in California continue because the one company interested withdrew its request, and the California Bus Association wrote a letter clearing Foothills Transit to keep running the shuttles. Fans attending football games at the University of Tennessee or Penn State won't be affected because they ride buses on regularly scheduled routes.

Mike Miller of the Jacksonville Transit Authority is curious to see what private companies want to take over the JTA's shuttles to Jaguar games.

The JTA isn't making money on its shuttles, which this year went up to as much as \$12 from the farthest parking lots, he said. The transit authority sees what it is doing as a community service, lowering congestion around the stadium and giving fans a pleasant game-day experience as cheaply as possible.

"I don't want to beat a dead horse here, but I think it's going to be very difficult for them to have to make a profit and charge a reasonable price," Miller said.

AP Sports Writer Joseph White in Washington contributed to this report.

