



## 3. commuter bus service

Commuter bus services are bus services designed to serve a very specific need such as transporting to/from a specific work site or work shift. The term commuter buses can also be used to reference express bus service from park and ride lots into a downtown destination, but for purposes of this TDM Toolkit, the term has been defined to mean a bus that is designed specifically to bring people to and from a particular work site. Commuter buses are often a direct replacement of, rather than an additive service, to existing public transportation.

### How it works

Commuter buses are typically an employer or Transportation Management Association (TMA) initiative and designed by the sponsor(s) to meet a very specific need, such as getting workers from one or more neighborhoods to work. In most cases, services are fully paid for by the sponsoring entity. To date, most commuter buses have not been able to access federal or state funds to help operate the service. Most examples of employer sponsored commuter buses have grown out of a need to attract and retain employees in areas with high commuting costs due to long or expensive travel and/or high time costs associated with congested travel conditions. It is also true that many commuter bus programs evolved out of other TDM programs, including employer provided/subsidized bus passes, expansive vanpool programs and other support programs such as ride-matching, guaranteed ride home, etc.

Commuter buses have become increasingly popular in and around high tech communities, such as the San Francisco Bay Area in California and Seattle, Washington. In most cases, employers developing private commuter bus services already work closely with regional and local transit providers so the commuter bus service is incorporated into the service network and supports other regional transit efforts.



### Application to the Mid-South Region

Commuter bus services in the Mid-South Region may make sense for commuters traveling to one or more of the major regional employers, such as the Tunica Resorts, Federal Express (especially late night shifts), or possibly some of the regional hospitals located on the outskirts of the urbanized area. However, given there are only limited transit services outside of the City of Memphis and the region has not yet developed a culture of ride-sharing, such as carpooling or vanpool, commuter bus service may not be appropriate except in cases where such service would have compelling financial appeal. Thus, prior to developing commuter bus service, employers should begin with more “entry level” TDM strategies such as carpooling and vanpooling.

## Best Practice

**Microsoft Connector Shuttles** - In 2007, Microsoft introduced “the Connector” a shuttle service for employees living in the Seattle area and traveling to the Microsoft campus in Redmond, a suburban community about 20 miles east of Seattle. The shortest path between Seattle and Redmond involves traveling the State Route 520 bridge over Lake Washington. The 520 bridge is tolled, with higher rates applied during typical commute times; the charge for a one-way crossing can be as high as \$5.25. Employee complaints about the length and cost of the commute made offering alternative transportation options a key strategy to attract and retain employees. These reasons plus a commitment to environmental stewardship led Microsoft to develop the employee shuttle.



The Connector service grew from 13 to 22 bus routes and now carries about 700,000 people a year. Individual routes are developed to reflect concentrations of employees and are designed to serve as many people as possible with direct and fast service. Most Connector routes offer about four or five trips per day, so employees have schedule options but the service is still efficient. Each of Microsoft’s Connector buses are equipped with Wi-Fi, power ports and bike racks.

The Microsoft Connector does not compete with the local transit provider, King County Metro. Instead, the service tries to fill gaps and provide a more cohesive network. Some employees may for example, use the Connector to get to work but ride a Metro bus home. Microsoft’s Connector may use a bay at Metro’s bus transit center but cannot use on-street transit stops. As a result, Microsoft works with local churches and business to establish stops in white curb zones and parking lots. With an average daily ridership of 3,400, the service equates to about one percent of Metro’s daily ridership<sup>1</sup>. It is also worth noting that in addition to the commuter bus, Microsoft also offers employee free bus passes and a full suite of TDM programs.



1 Private Commuter Buses: Rogue Operations or New Model?, University of California, Berkeley, CA 2013