

Sarah Gilliam  
The Red and Black  
February 6, 2005

## PUBLIC TRANSIT SEEN AS SOLUTION FOR NON-ATTAINMENT IN ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY

If you are a breathing human being in the Athens-Clarke county area, then you need to be familiar with the term “non-attainment.”

Non-attainment is a term defined by the Environmental Protection Agency indicating the cleanliness of the air. When an area, like Athens-Clarke County, earns a “non-attainment” status, it means that the area exceeds the federal minimum limit for ozone and particulate matter content over a three year average.

Particulate matter consists of small particles found in the air measuring 2.5 micrograms or smaller. These particles are mostly formed in the air when foreign gases, like organic carbons from diesel, combine with the native gases of air. Some of the particles are directly emitted from mechanical fuel combustion in cars and trucks.

As determined in a study done by the EPA in 2004, Athens-Clarke County is currently meeting the standards for ozone and particulate matter, but the area is close to reaching non-attainment, according to Ron Methier of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division.

“Athens should mimic some of Atlanta’s airshed rules like cleaner gasoline, open air restrictions, new power plant rules, and stricter industrial rules in order to keep the air clean,” said Methier in a phone interview.

Just because the numbers are down does not mean that Athens is totally in the clear. The increase in dependency on private automobiles has been cited as the main cause for air pollution problems.

In a study done by the Northeast Georgia Regional Developmental Center, toxic pollution from the Athens area is estimated to be 9 million pounds annually.

This study only considers automobiles registered in Athens-Clarke County and industries located in the county.

It does not count the tens of thousands of cars that commuters drive daily into Athens, nor the more than 30,000 university students, a large percentage of which do not register their cars in Clarke County, according to study’s website.

A viable solution to this problem is increasing the scope of public transit. Athens Transit is recognized as an “outstanding transit system for its size,” but it could use some improvements, according to the BikeAthens website.

Local non-profit BikeAthens, which advocates for diverse transportation options in Athens, is working to increase funding for the local transit system.

“Transit riding greatly decreases air pollution,” said Brent Buice, BikeAthens VP. “For every rider, that’s one less car!”

Public transit also reduces parking needs downtown and on campus, decreases vehicle congestion on roads and makes streets safer even for people who never step foot on a bus, said Buice.

Although public transit offers many solutions, Athens Transit is operating at maximum capacity with its current budget. Like all ACC departments, transit is currently facing an eight percent cut, according to the BikeAthens website.

“Recent public comment to transportation planners shows high demand for expanded service, which underscores the need for public transportation,” Buice said.

Along with an increase in the amount of riders, a demand for extended hours of service has also surfaced. Currently, most buses run once every hour and quit running after six or seven at night.

If buses ran more frequently and had later hours, students would be more prone to using Athens Transit for their transportation to and from campus. This would increase the amount of money Athens Transit receives from University of Georgia’s transportation fee, which most students pay for. Every swipe of a UGA card currently gives Athens Transit \$.89.

“I ride the Athens Bus from time to time,” said Lindsay Saripkin, a senior from Marietta, Ga, majoring in Sociology, “but waiting for an hour in the cold for the next bus does not motivate me to depend on it as my dominant mode of transportation.”

Currently Athens Transit is considering a \$.25 fare increase which if approved, will be the first increase since 1997. This fare increase will help combat the budget cuts, but fare box revenue contributes to 40 percent of operational costs for public transit, which is very high compared to other transit systems, according to Buice.

In addition to the fare increase, some solutions to raise funds for transit include increased funding from local and state governments and the imposition of an extra tax on gasoline

In order to obtain more funds from the state, an amendment to the state constitution would be required allowing Athens citizens to vote on whether we want a special sales tax that would fund transit exclusively. The penny sales tax that funds MARTA in Atlanta is an example of this method.

Opportunities do exist for those interested in influencing local government on the issue of public transit.

On March 8, 2005 at 5:30 p.m. there is a Mayor and Commission “Working Session” where the public is invited to attend. Although public comment is not permitted at “working session” meetings, a strong attendance will not go unnoticed.

In general, one can contact the Mayor and Commission’s Office through email or mail. The Athens-Clarke County website ([athensclarkecounty.com](http://athensclarkecounty.com)) has e-mail and mail listings for the mayor and all ten commissioners.