



NOV 29

Ridership drop leads to discussion on bus schedule reform

Cole White

The U-Pass system, which provides free bus rides by swiping a U-Card, has seen dwindling use over the past few years. Now an effort is being made to improve that.

“The peak was in the 2011-12 year, and it’s been kind of a slow decline since then,” said Patrick Keenan, director of student life operations.

The decline in ridership coincides with a decline in enrollment, Keenan suggests. Since enrollment peaked in 2012, UMD has lost 966 students to a decrease in enrollment, a number that is reflected in the ridership with the Duluth Transit Authority (DTA).

“When you lose 1000 students you’re going to lose that ridership,” Keenan said.

Keenan maintains that the program not only benefits students but also UMD as a whole.

“It’s a good relationship,” Keenan said. “We have a couple hundred thousand riders a year who are choosing to ride the bus and not bring their car in which certainly helps the capacity of the parking lots.”

Keenan, along with the Student Association (SA), is beginning to look at solutions to increase ridership on city busses. Keenan sees another correlation over the past four years.

“2011-12 was also the peak price for gasoline. When you look at less students on campus and almost 50 percent the price of gas it’s a lot less attractive to ride the bus,” Keenan said.

Members of SA, like Cody Brumbaugh, are now tasked with looking at solutions.

“We’re looking at a route more specific to students,” Brumbaugh said. “A lot of student housing is on 6th Ave.”

Brumbaugh suggests a bus route that does not end up at the downtown DTA hub but rather remains college-centric.

Brumbaugh also commented on the timing of bus schedules for students.

“People either arrive a minute before class or half an hour before class,” Brumbaugh said, speaking to the inconvenience that may discourage students from pursuing the option.

While the discussion is still in an early stage, the declining ridership, according to Keegan, is being addressed.

“We’re just beginning conversations with DTA,” Keenan said. “We’re looking at why the decline is there and I think it has to do with falling gas prices, lower enrollment and change in student housing demographics.”

Despite declining ridership, Keenan remains optimistic about the future of the program.

“It’s still a useful program. I don’t see the U-Pass program eliminated,” Keenan said. “As enrollment begins to rise, I’d like to see ridership rise as well.”



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As the snow hits the ground and Thanksgiving approaches, Duluth’s own Bentleyville has opened its gates to welcome the 2016 season. Photo by Rich Hoag

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