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Transit researchers get their own room to move at UMass

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AMHERST - Working out of a busdrivers' breakroom in an overcrowded, 37-year-old facility might have been cozy, but it wasn't ideal for research technician James Schleicher and his co-workers.

However, that changed earlier this month when Schleicher and the staff of the Regional Traveler Information Center, a division of Transit Services at the University of Massachusetts, moved into new headquarters.

"It's wonderful," he said of his new workspace housed inside university's new $5 million Transit Center. "We've got room to spread out here."

Though the center has only three full-time staff members, they frequently have students and faculty helping out with research.

Founded in 2001 by Paul Shuldiner, its director and principal investigator, the center's research provides a variety of data and services, including traffic information, real-time locations of PVTA buses, estimated Route 9 travel times, construction, congestion and weather advisories and regional tourism and event information.

The center's Web site, www.masstraveler.com, hosts 12 live Web cams of Routes 9 and 116 to monitor traffic speed, travel times and road conditions.

A recent request by CBS 3 in Springfield to use the camera footage for their televised traffic updates has the two organizations in negotiations, said Allan Byam, associate director for Campus Transportation Services.

Since the center is nonprofit and funded by grant money for research, the center will not ask for compensation from CBS 3 if they are allowed to use the video.

The idea could increase the popularity of the center's site, which gets between 70 to 200 hits per day depending on weather conditions and whether there are events that could create traffic backups. Campus events like commencements, move-in day for on-campus residents in the fall, snowstorms and sporting activities have also spurred hikes in the number of visitors to the site.

Another service offered by the center measures the speed and travel time along area roadways. Sensors set up on the street read toll-paying transponders - like the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority's FAST LANE or E-ZPass, used in several Northeastern states - to track when a vehicle passes a certain point and then how long the vehicle takes to pass the next point.

However, between the two points there can be variables, such as if a driver were to make a stop somewhere. For example, between sensors installed along a 5-mile stretch of Route 16 in Sunderland, motorists can stop at a 7-Eleven convenience store or another 7-Eleven gas station, causing the travel time to be irregularly long. These instances create exceptions in the data, which are filtered and not factored in with the other results.

"It's going to be hard in the summer when that ice cream stand opens," joked Byam, referring to the Sugarloaf Frostie takeout ice cream and food stand also between the two sensors on Route 116.

Privacy matters

The data collected by the sensors is privacy sensitive, meaning that only data needed to measure a vehicle's speed and travel time is gathered.

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The center has received requests by police seeking archives of their collected data. However, the data from transponders provides no useful information to authorities, and Web cam images are deleted every few minutes.

Beyond their new, high-tech facility, the center hopes to expand further by installing more cameras, including models which provide better views at nighttime, and put more sensors on the streets.

"We've got a lot of room to grow," said Byam.

As local roads are being improved or repaired, the group would like to install sensors in the pavement to gauge road conditions and temperatures, which could help predict when a street may become icy or when snow will accumulate.

They are also looking to team with the university's Parking Services department, if and when electronic parking is introduced. The center would be able to provide real-time information concerning when lots are full, pinpoint empty parking spaces and determine how long a spot has been occupied.

However, the plan for electronic parking is still in its "visionary phase," said Byam.

Dial 511

Similar to dialing 411 for information, 511- a new nationwide traveler information telephone number - has already been implemented in the eastern part of the state and is making its way to western Massachusetts. According to Byam, the center would be involved in providing information to the traveler's hotline and could become its data center.

The center also has ambitions to install more Web cams in the area, including ones that could transmit data wirelessly. They mentioned locations like downtown Amherst and the Route 9/Bay Road intersection.

The Massachusetts Highway Department and the center may work together to add similar services such as Route 2 corridor travel advisories, and Sunderland Bridge and I-91 corridor conditions.

"We have a Christmas list of places of where we want to put our cameras," said Byam, but the feasibility of such projects depend on funding.

Maintaining the cameras, though, can be a process in itself.

"They're in a very hostile environment. So, they do require some service," said Schleicher.

In terms of the center's budget, he said, "We're hanging in there. Everyone is kind of treading water."

So far, the incoming grant money has not been affected by UMass budget cuts or by the slowed economy.

When the new facility was recreated this year, the building cost a less-than-anticipated $2.9 million, allowing the center to use some of the $2.1 million in excess funding. Transit Center officials purchased more advanced equipment to fill the inside, Byam said.

Two powerful computer servers are among the upgrades for the center, which has given it "more breathing room," said Schleicher.

Aiding in the effort, transportation engineering students at the university have worked with the center to help research traffic congestion in the Pioneer Valley.

"If you're from Boston, this traffic is not an issue. But when the students come back for the semester, I get annoyed when my commute goes from four minutes to 10 (minutes)," Byam said.

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