

Welcome to "Transit Talk," our third Web chat with President/CEO Frank J. Wilson.

Today's topics: the airport express shuttle and HOT Lanes. We will soon be launching express service from downtown to Bush Intercontinental's Terminal C.

HOT Lanes stand for "high occupancy toll" lanes where single drivers are charged a fee on a toll road to drive during rush hour. It's also called congestion pricing or value pricing. It's a way for officials to ease highway congestion and better manage HOV lanes.

All questions will be moderated, and only those on-topic will be considered.

(12:03:32 PM) Q : Are you still considering dynamic congestion pricing for the HOT lanes ?
Frank J Wilson: A : Yes, we are.

(12:04:11 PM) Q : May i give a point of view on the shuttle
Frank J Wilson: A : Sure.

(12:06:00 PM) Q : Why is the charge \$15 each way? I think that is excessive
Frank J Wilson: A : Here's the trip making options from downtown to the airport: limosine, \$120 round-trip; taxi, \$89 round-trip; Super Shuttle, \$46, round-trip; METRO Airport Express, \$30 round-trip. It appears to be the best bargain in town.

(12:09:20 PM) Q : I think about \$5 max is the right price for a public transit system. I've been to several cities and this is the highest.
Frank J Wilson: A : San Francisco is a local transit, multi-stop ride. It's also only 12 to 15 miles from airport to downtown. METRO Airport Express is a premium, nonstop, 30-minute service on a trip length of 25 miles. There is a difference.

(12:10:06 PM) Q : Will the shuttle buses utilize the HOV lanes when directionally possible ?
Frank J Wilson: A : Yes. And they'll use the Hardy Toll Road for the alternate return trip. Therefore, reliability should be extremely high.

(12:10:37 PM) Q : When does the bus service to IAH start?
Frank J Wilson: A : Our current thoughts would have a start-up in August this year.

(12:11:15 PM) Q : Rail does not help me though as I take the 82 home, so now the cost is an additional \$2? Why would you not give me a ride to my house 82? Why do I have to pay more?
Frank J Wilson: A : Use your Q Card on the METRO Airport Express, and you get an automatic free transfer on any route you want.

(12:13:24 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Can you give airpor workers and airline employees a discount?
A : We're not discounting the service. It's already discounted. The way to get this discount is to use the Q Card.

(12:14:14 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Are these shuttle buses going to look different from other buses?
A : No. They'll be identical to METRO's Park & Ride coaches. The only distinguishing feature may be some sort of airline icon on the exterior of the bus.

(12:15:59 PM) Guest_8fe3: Actually, I think \$15 is reasonable, especially compared to the cost of a taxi or parking at the airport. When I took the Paris Metro from CDG airport into Paris in March 2005 the cost was about 8 or 9 Euros (which would be about \$15 US today) and that train made many stops and took much longer than 30 minutes.

(12:16:06 PM) Guest_63cb: Remember the 112 that you had a few years ago? Why did that fail? I never took it as the schedule was bad. Will this new one run weekends? What is the proposed schedule?

(12:16:19 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Will there be a place for my luggage?
A : Of course.

Guest_445f joined the room.

(12:17:10 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Which is an issue as you have no place for luggage...This is a current issue on the 102, by the way.
A : Yes, the Park & Ride bus has an underfloor baggage bay. And we expect to be able to assist with the loading and unloading of heavier bags.

(12:17:18 PM) busguy: I also think the price is reasonable. Comparing the service to the Super Shuttle, one way from the Hyatt Downtown to IAH is \$23.00.

(12:17:35 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Actually, I think \$15 is reasonable, especially compared to the cost of a taxi or parking at the airport. When I took the Paris Metro from CDG airport into Paris in March 2005 the cost was about 8 or 9 Euros (which would be about \$15 US today) and that train made many stops and took much longer than 30 minutes.

A : Thank you - you're right.
O.K. you talked about comparing distance; CDG to Paris is a much longer distance than IAH to downtown and they do actually have express trains. It is not a bus, although they do have a bus service which is run by Air France which has a TV and a toilet...

Guest_445f left this room.

(12:18:27 PM) Guest_63cb: You cannot a Metro bus service to a private service!

(12:18:45 PM) Guest_63cb: I hope busguy will take it

(12:18:46 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Remember the 112 that you had a few years ago? Why did that fail? I never took it as the schedule was bad. Will this new one run weekends? What is the proposed schedule?

A : The 112 was run like a regular transit route with multiple stops. We believe this is a deadly feature for those who put a high premium on time and reliability.

(12:20:26 PM)
Guest_63cb: Interesting about the bus bays, I've never in almost 3 years of taking the 102 been offered that underfloor baggage bay; I know you can put bikes on the front, but that was it. SO I think a little training is in order here. I've watched people struggle to find a room for their bags including myself.

Q : So how come no rail to the airport?

(12:20:57 PM)
Frank J Wilson: A : There's spotty success in this country with rail services to airports, very high cost to build and given the size of our metropolitan area, it's difficult to serve enough people from just a few destinations. Therefore, the ridership and revenue compared to cost is extremely unfavorable.

(12:21:03 PM)
Guest_63cb: the 112 had no stops from downtown to the airport when it operated

(12:21:34 PM) Guest_63cb: Yes, why no rail? since Houston 4th largest city in the union!

(12:21:39 PM) busguy to I actually think you can make the comparison. It's a
(12:21:39 PM) Guest_63cb: shared ride, takes the same (or less) time.

Guest_92f4 joined the room.

(12:22:13 PM)
Guest_63cb: we will agree to disagree on that busguy;

(12:22:43 PM)
Guest_63cb: \$15 is high for a city-sponsored transit system is all I'm saying

(12:23:07 PM)
Guest_ee93: I'd like to change the topic to HOT lanes if that's OK. Are you still considering dynamic congestion pricing for the HOT lanes ?

Guest_8fe3 left this room.

(12:24:34 PM) Frank J Q : I'd like to change the topic to HOT lanes if that's OK. Are you still considering dynamic congestion pricing for the HOT lanes ?

Wilson: A : Yes.

Q : That is not true, Frank; Portland, San Fran, New York, Chicago, Boston, Oakland, LAX to an extent and Seattle in '09 all work well, so why not Houston? Are we that different?

(12:29:05 PM) Frank J A : My experience says otherwise. There is no direct rail to LAX, there's no direct rail to Oakland. I built the San Francisco line. Can't find enough people to use it. I ran the Chicago operation. It's one station in the middle of a vast airport complex, and it took 17 minutes to walk from the rail station to the jetway prior to the TSA shakedown operation, and that's if you were going only to the United terminal. If you needed to get to another airline, you'd be wise to pack a lunch.
Wilson:

In other words, it was a challenge at best. NY is wonderful if you're going to Kennedy, and Portland is a potential success.

So as I said, in this country, the results are spotty. Some good, many are questionable. BTW, I also built and ran the rail service to the Philadelphia airport from downtown, and on a good day, we struggled to get to 2,000 riders. Not a very cost-effective operation.

(12:31:06 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Even at a one-way fare of \$15 to IAH, does that cover METRO's cost?
A : At 500 people a day, we have a net cost that we can't recover from revenue of about \$300,000 a year.

(12:33:15 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Then you should look into ways of decreasing your cost, and not trying to cover it by charging more.
A : Great idea. We do that with every service we run.

(12:34:24 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : I would trust that the travel time on a bus using the HOV lanes on 59 would be more reliable than the 102 route that uses I-45, especially at rush hour.
A : Agree. That's why we're on 59.

(12:35:11 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : How are you going to monitor adherence to the HOT lane price?
A : Through surveillance technology and more police.

(12:37:14 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : How will people who are visiting IAH and don't have change pay for this service?
A : We'll sell them a Q Card from the airport and from the Downtown Transit Center, and that will enable them to ride the METRO Epress and the rest of the transit system.

(12:38:20 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : I see; will you accept credit cards?
A : Yes.

(12:39:27 PM) Guest_63cb: Frank, I do appreciate you listening to us today and I hope my rants will help you to create a more cost effective system for the consumers of Houston and those visiting...\$15 is too much, I re-iterate adn you've lost me as a rider. I flew 500,000 miles last year and I took the 102 almsr every weekend so I am an experienced traveler.

(12:40:04 PM) Frank J Wilson: Guest_63cb, thank you for noticing. I had the great privilege of being instrumental in building the station on the Amtrak line that links to the Newark airport people mover while Commissioner of Transportation for the state of New Jersey. I only mention this to prove that I'm not anti-rail to airports, but I'm a big supporter for systems that have a chance of success.

(12:40:49 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Do you have estimates of the HOT Lane revenue vs. cost of the required technology and operators, police, etc.?

Wilson: A : It's break even.

(12:43:28 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Frank, have you ever ridden the 102? If not, please do so for about a month and try to understand the people who take the bus and where they go.
A : I have studied the 102 users and we find that they are by and large, not air travelers but more likely to be employees, many of which do not desire a downtown destination.

(12:44:56 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : It is clear that you are knowledgeable on your rail systems and that is good. But we need one in Houston; however you all figure out how to finance it. I won't even mention train systems in Europe.
A : I couldn't agree with you more that we need a robust rail system in Houston and 1,000 people at METRO every day spend a good portion of that day trying to make that happen in our lifetime. Europe had a few hundred years head start, but Americans close fast. We'll be there some day.

(12:45:00 PM) Guest_fc56: How long will it take for the HOT Lanes to break even? ... Need to pay off the technology and infrastructure, right? Or is a separate capital expenditure needed for that?

(12:45:51 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : I can't turn down a free ride, but the next time I'll have to pay \$15. It is not the service as I take the 102, it is the sot Frank, thank you for your offer and I'll take you up on it; can't promise I'll continue paying \$15 though. Unless I am in dire straights one day...

A : OK, so you're a tough customer. I like challenges, and we'll work hard to win your business.

(12:46:25 PM) Guest_63cb: Thanks for looking the train system for houston and IAH/HOU

(12:46:43 PM) Guest_f985: Back to HOT Lanes: Why do it?

(12:47:18 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : How long will it take for the HOT Lanes to break even? ... Need to pay off the technology and infrastructure, right? Or is a separate capital expenditure needed for that?

A : The operating cost will be covered year to year from opening date but the infrastructure cost will take a 20-to-30-year payout.

(12:48:40 PM) Frank J Wilson: Q : Back to HOT Lanes: Why do it?
A : So that we can use the current unused capacity in the HOV lane to help reduce growing congestion in the general purpose lanes; however, we intend to do this without sacrificing travel time and reliability in the HOV lanes. All in all, move more people in the same amount of time through more effective use of the existing assets.

Q : On HOT lanes: Given that Harris County took away Metro's HOV ROW in I-10 and the 290 expansion plan calls for the same treatment, how will Metro deliver service to suburbs in the future if that is under the control of HCTRA, which competes with Metro for commuters?

(12:51:05 PM) Frank J Wilson: A : We're working with county, HCTRA, TxDot to preserve options in all these suburban travel corridors. Now let me remind you that our Park & Ride buses will be able to use the I-10 managed lanes at no cost and we expect to have access to a high-capacity transit corridor along 290 when all the roadway work is complete.

Q : Wow, that's a long time! How much does this stuff cost?

(12:53:03 PM) Frank J Wilson: A : All infrastructure projects are paid for over their service life, and typically, these infrastructure projects have service lives that go from 20 years to 100 years. Our best estimate at this time is tens of millions, not \$100 million.

Q : Do you think you're going to have to offer other ways to get into the HOV lanes (other than through P&R lots) to make HOT lanes work ?

(12:59:04 PM) Frank J Wilson: A : That's a great question. One of the major drawbacks of our existing HOV lane operation is the lack of access points. We see the HOV program in three phases. First, put the toll and enforcement technology in place. Second, create more access and egress points. Third, dualize or double the width of the HOV lane so that we can have two-way operation 24 hours/day, every day. As you might guess, each phase takes longer to implement and cost more than the previous phase, but we're making a start now with a plan to continue as resources allow.

(1:01:18 PM) Frank J Wilson: Time's up. Thanks for joining us. Look forward to hearing from you again on our next Web chat.