

Columbus

Taking charge of public transportation

Located just off of Interstate 65 in Bartholomew County, the city of Columbus, Indiana, (pop. 40,000) has earned a reputation for its innovative municipal services and award-winning programs.

Several years ago, Mayor Fred Armstrong accepted an IACT Community Achievement award for "Share the Warmth," a forgivable loan program administered by the city to residents with broken furnaces or no heat. Through the program, the city installed 45 new, high-efficiency units, and was able to address safety issues and fire hazards such as those presented by the use of kerosene heaters.

The city is implementing creative new programs again — this time incorporating *Park & Ride*, a shuttle service for downtown employees geared toward eliminating downtown parking congestion.

Like many cities and towns in Indiana and across the country, Columbus has been struggling with how to address a perceived downtown parking problem.

Each day, 3,400 downtown employees compete for spaces in only three lots leased by the city. And there are long waiting lists for monthly parking.

With this in mind, city officials began to search for alternatives to building a downtown parking garage, which was not an expense allotted for in the city's annual budget.

Expanding on *ColumBUS*, the existing municipal transportation

system, Mayor Armstrong and other city officials presented the idea of a shuttle service to downtown merchants which would be modeled after the Indianapolis International Airport's *Park, Ride & Fly* service.

Under the proposal, the city of Columbus would provide free transportation at 10-minute intervals on weekday mornings and evenings from a parking lot located in Mill Race Park to the downtown business district, a distance of about two blocks.

Utilizing a spare bus from the city's transportation department, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program income and a parking lot two blocks from downtown, *Park & Ride* was initiated last April as a 13-week pilot program with five or 10 riders initially taking advantage of the free service.

The pilot program quickly became a success, with more than 50 people now riding each way daily.

Due to the overwhelming response from downtown employees, the city set aside \$30,000 in its 2004 budget to fund a position for a full-time driver, fuel and bus maintenance.

Mayor Armstrong credits the city's well-liked *Park & Ride* driver for the program's growing popularity and increasing success.

"Max Zeigler (the bus driver) is the real reason for the success of this program," said Mayor Armstrong. "He knows his riders by name and knows their schedules, and even takes it upon himself to market the program to more downtown businesses."

It generally takes 12-14 minutes for Zeigler to make a complete circle on the route, and he drops people off and picks them up almost right in front of their places of employment. In the hustle and bustle of today's society, employees are relieved not to have to walk two extra blocks from a paid parking spot to their desk. Instead, they sit and relax and take advantage of this free shuttle service.

Downtown businesses seem to appreciate the service, too, since more downtown parking spaces are made available for customers. Zeigler also helps downtown merchants market their products by handing out coupons and fliers to his daily passengers.

Patty Kinney, a downtown employee for the past eight years, is ecstatic about the new program.

"I use *Park & Ride* because it is more convenient than trying to find a parking space on the Avenue, which is nearly impossible sometimes. With this (shuttle service) it is only three steps from the bus to my desk," Kinney

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

said. "Plus, this is the first year I haven't had a parking ticket."

Columbus public safety director Jim Norris is optimistic about the proactive initiatives his department has taken and is looking forward to continuing the progress. He recognizes what an asset the *Park & Ride* program is to the city and is quick to recognize Zeigler for the program's success.

When asked what the most enjoyable part of his job was, Zeigler did not hesitate.

"The people — I have grown close to my riders — I know them all by name and what vehicles they drive and it's like we have become a close-knit family, sharing the day-to-day events in our lives," Zeigler said. "The closeness was very evident (January 19) as we were all crying the blues after the Colts lost to New England.

"I look forward to going to work every day, and there's a lot to be said



Employees working in downtown Columbus have utilized parking spaces at nearby Mill Race Park as they take advantage of the city's new Park & Ride program.

for that," Zeigler said.

The *Park & Ride* program is just one of the successes of the city's transportation system. Two years ago, *ColumBUS* was named the "Community Transportation Program of the Year" by National Bus Service.

The city also has involved the community in its transit system, hosting a bus design contest for its new buses, and providing free service on its regular routes on special days including Election Day and throughout the week of the county fair.